

氷華の女王

剣舞 13

グレイドダンス

志瑞祐

Illustration
桜はんぺん

精霊使いの

MF文庫



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雪のような肌を覆うブラック・レザーの拘束衣。
背中に生えた漆黒の翼。

神秘的な紫紺の瞳は、冷たくカミトを見下ろしている。

「エスト、お、おまえ……」

「いいえ、私はもう聖剣

〈テルミヌス・エスト〉ではありません」

「……え？」

首を振って否定するエストに、絶句するカミト。

そんなカミトを、

エストは冷たく無表情に見下ろして、

「私は、闇に堕ちた精霊――

〈ダーク・エスト〉」

Est
エスト

Rinslet Laurenfrost
リンズレット・ローレンフロスト

「じゅじゅとしていて
くださいな！」

しゅるっ。するするするっ。……ぱさり。
突然、リンズレットがスカートを脱ぎはじめた。
下着姿になったリンズレットは、
カミトの上に馬乗りになった。
繊細な刺繍のほどこされた
シルク生地のパンツ。
ふよふよと柔らかいふとももの感触が、
下腹部に押しつけられる。





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Prologue

—I am here, Kamito. Undoubtedly here in your heart.

Echoing in his mind was her voice.

A gentle voice that one could submerge oneself within.

However, she was no longer in this world. The spirit seal that stood as evidence of the contract had already vanished. Only a moon-like crest remained branded on his right hand.

In order to protect Kamito, she had left behind the power of darkness.

This power was bequeathed to Terminus Est, the «Demon King's Sword».

(...Restia's will has already become a part of my heart, but—)

Lying on the bed in his room right now, Kamito reached out to block the light in front of his eyes.

He had already discarded the black leather glove he used to wear on his left hand.

...Right now, with the seal gone, it was no longer necessary to wear that thing.

"Because, you're already..."

Kamito sighed lightly. Suddenly, he felt an alarming squirming under his sheets.

"...!?"

Kamito frantically pulled his sheets.

"...Wah, that feels cold, Kamito."

The adorable silver-haired spirit emerged from under Kamito's sheets.

To Kamito, this was already a scene that could not be more familiar. However, this sight—

"E-Est, what's with your look..."

Indeed, Est was not in her usual naked kneesocks getup.

Two twisted horns, one on each side of her head. The snow-like complexion of her skin was covered by a bondage suit of black leather. Pitch-black wings sprouted from her back. Her mysterious violet eyes looked down coldly at Kamito from above.

In contrast to her usual purity and innocence, Est was currently the very image of depravity and seduction.

(...N-No way—!)

Kamito suddenly realized that Est had inherited Restia's power of darkness as the «Demon King's Sword». Did she turn into this under that power's influence?

"—Kamito."

Dressed in the black outfit, Est touched Kamito's lip lightly with her index finger.

Sultry to the point of shaking Kamito to the core, her appearance was making his heart pound uncontrollably.

"Est, y-you..."

"No, I am no longer the sacred sword «Terminus Est»."

"...Huh?"

Seeing Est shake her head in disagreement, Kamito was at a loss for words.

Expressionlessly, Est gazed at Kamito.

"I am... the spirit that has fallen into darkness, «Dark Est»."

"Dark... Est...?"

"Indeed. I am now the messenger of eternal night, the existence that shall plunge the world into darkness—"

Est gently closed her violet eyes and declared lightly in a voice so sorrowful that it almost plunged the listener into darkness.

"...Hey Est."

Resting his forehead against his hand, Kamito sighed while reaching one hand towards Est's head.

"Ah, what are you doing, Kamito?"

With her horns suddenly plucked off, Est frantically tried to snatch them back.

...So light. They felt as though they were made of something like cardboard.

"...Jeez. Where the heck did you find these things?"

Kamito asked lightly while dodging Est's hands that were trying to snatch back the horns.

...Well, the answer was obvious. Most likely from among a certain princess's ritual equipment or something like that.

"Kamito, please return that to me."

Est made a rare, shaken look.

"Without that, I cannot become Dark Est."

"...Then just don't become that whatever Dark Est. By the way, what exactly is Dark Est?"

"Yes, because Kamito won't play with me recently, I have turned into a bad girl."

Est's words shocked Kamito.

Indeed, Kamito had been pondering the issue of Restia's disappearance for the past few days, leaving him no time to spend with Est. She was apparently sulking for this reason.

"S-Sorry Est."

Kamito apologized while stroking Est's silver hair gently.

"Huah~"

"But you must turn back to the original Est for me. I still like the usual Est better."

While Kamito was hugging her in his arms and stroking her head lightly, the legendary sword spirit half closed her eyes in pleasure.

"Yes, Kamito."

Est nodded.

"—I am your sword, your wish is my command."

...Rustle, rustle.

Est started to take off the black bondage suit while still being held in Kamito's arms.

"W-Wait! You don't have to strip right here—"

Just as Kamito was about to stop her—

"Kamito-san, bad news!"

Suddenly, his room door flew open.

"...What!?"

Barging into the room, the girl stared with her emerald eyes wide.

A dazzlingly beautiful face, adorned with sleek, lustrous platinum blonde hair.

The visitor turned out to be Rinslet Laurenfrost, the daughter of Margrave Laurenfrost from the Ordesia Empire.

"...~K-Kamito-san, what, exactly, are you doing!?"

"H-Hold on! This is a misunderstanding, Est was saying she's going to plunge the world into darkness, umm—"

Kamito desperately tried to explain but—

He was currently sitting in bed, holding in his arms a half-naked spirit in the form of a beautiful young girl. No amount of explaining could ever help.

"Th-That is truly too vulgar. Sure enough, Kamito-san, you are the king of lust."

"Rinslet! Lower your voice or else people will hear outside—"

"Kamito, this outfit is hard to take off because of the wings."

"Like I said, stop stripping!"

"So you prefer a partial state of undress, Kamito?"

"...!?"

"...Kamito-san!!"

Byoooooooooo...!

Cold air exploded from all over Rinslet's body, freezing the air in the room all at once.

Frost appeared on the window. The rug underfoot was also frozen solid.

"—Seriously, what exactly are you two doing?"

"...Eh?"

As Kamito exclaimed in surprise, a giant white wolf appeared outside the door—Rinslet's contracted spirit, «Fenrir».

"Fenrir... Y-You can talk?"

Completely forgetting the crisis at hand, Kamito asked in shock.

However, Fenrir shook his head.

"No, I am merely borrowing the body of this demon ice spirit."

Kamito remembered this voice.

The clear voice of a girl's, conveying strong willpower.

"...Could it be, you're the «Water Elemental Lord»?"

"Listen carefully, Demon King's successor. I have important things to tell you right now."

"...Very important things?"

Fenrir nodded affirmatively, his eyes shining brightly as they stared at Kamito.

Chapter 1 - The Awakened Girl

Part 1

—«Great Festival of the Spirits». On that day, militarized spirits of unknown origin had taken the opportunity to attack the Academy.

Not only the Academy but the town at the foot of the mountain was also caught up in this incident. Several days had passed since then.

Almost half of the attacked Academy was wrecked. Led by Greyworth, the teachers were actively discussing solutions. Including Ellis the captain, all members of the Sylphid Knights ceased their duties since lessons at the Academy were also suspended in the meantime. The majority of highborn daughters had returned to their families' territories. Even the Raven Class dorm where Kamito lived was no exception.

Kamito's roommate, Claire, had returned home to meet her parents who had been released. A special pardon had been granted due to Team Scarlet's victory in the Blade Dance.

The other roommate, Fianna, had already set off even before Claire, making her return to the imperial family. Although Fianna had already given up her succession rights to the throne and left the imperial family, due to retrieving her power of the spirit contract, no matter how reluctant Fianna felt, occasions when she was summoned back as an important member of the imperial family were gradually getting more frequent.

Hence, the only two people currently remaining at the student dormitory were Kamito who had nowhere else to go and Rinslet who had yet to return to her family's territory. Her departure was delayed because recent snowfall contrary to seasonal norms had blocked the mountain route back to Laurenfrost territory.

(...That snowstorm might be related to the rampage of the «Elemental Lords».)

Thinking over these matters, Kamito picked up the cup of black tea prepared on the table.

"...Mmm, smells so good."

"That goes without saying, these are top-quality tea leaves, a Laurenfrost local specialty."

Sitting on Kamito's right, Rinslet smiled proudly.

"Yeah, but I think it's because you brewed the tea personally, Rinslet."

"...! You are not getting anywhere even if you flatter me."

Blushing, Rinslet went "hmpf" and turned her face away.

There were also many tasty-looking snacks on the table, the scones she had baked this morning. Sweet syrup was dripped over the the crisp surfaces of the scone. Truly delicious.

Having taken off her Dark Est outfit, Est had changed into her uniform and was stuffing herself with scones beside Kamito. Meanwhile, sitting on the floor, the white wolf was using its paws to hold a teacup nimbly, enjoying the black tea.

"It is truly suffering that this body cannot enjoy the tea and snacks that you've prepared specially. I would really love to savor those pancakes of yours again some time."

"Just let me know any time and I could make offerings to you at the imperial capital's shrine."

Rinslet bowed her head respectfully and answered.

After a short while, Kamito returned his cup to the table and said:

"So—"

Cutting straight to the point.

"So what is the important thing you mentioned just now?"

"...Yes. Counting today, it is something that happened four days ago."

The elemental lord's incarnation appearing in a white wolf's form—Iseria—started speaking solemnly.

"The Divine Ritual Insitute's «Queens» have observed the appearance of a «Gate» at a certain location in the human realm."

"Gate...?"

Kamito frowned.

"You mean an «Astral Gate»?"

At special locations such as the «Spirit Forest», it was perfectly natural for «Gates» leading to Astral Zero to manifest. In actual fact, the Academy's «Sylphid Knights» were frequently troubled by the spirits and beasts that accidentally pass through the Astral Gates.

"...That «Gate», is there a problem?"

"A «Gate» appearing in the human realm is in itself nothing particularly special. However, that forest is not a place where ordinary gates can manifest."

"...A gate outside of the «Spirit Forest», you're saying?"

"Is something like that even possible?"

Seeing Rinslet not entirely convinced, Iseria nodded solemnly.

"Indeed. Due to the «Elemental Lords» going insane, it is uncertain whether anomalies could occur between «Astral Zero» and the human realm. Feeling a bit concerned, I sent subordinate spirits to investigate the place where the «Gate» had appeared. In the end, nothing anomalous was found, but—"

The white wolf's round eyes stared straight at Kamito.

"The spirits I sent over there found something strange in the vicinity."

"...Something strange?"

"—Yes, a girl with hair the color of darkness, wearing a dress of black."

"...!"

Kamito stared wide-eyed.

That image of her, carved into his mind, instantly surged forth.

"—A final farewell, Kamito."

Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Miss Sacred Sword, please protect... Kamito well..."

(...Yeah, she—should have disappeared already. Only remaining in my heart.)

For the sake of saving Kamito from the «Darkness Elemental Lord»'s control—

Looking at his left hand where the spirit seal had already disappeared, Kamito then stared at the elemental lord's incarnation in front of him. An anxious voice was squeezed out of his throat:

"...This must be a coincidence. I'm sure girls dressed like that can be found everywhere."

"Indeed, it could be a coincidence. Girls in dresses can be found in any number on this continent."

Iseria nodded honestly.

"However, that girl suddenly appeared in a forest at the border. How large of a coincidence is that? And the gate also happened to be observed four days ago."

"Speaking of four days ago—"

Rinslet spoke up in surprise:

"That would be the very day when Kamito-san retrieved his memories, isn't it!?"

"..."

Four days earlier, in order to retrieve Est who was sealed in the «Burial Chamber», Kamito had gone to the underground military installation. That was where he had been attacked by Lurie Lizaldia of the «Numbers». Severely injured on the verge of death, Kamito had awakened Restia's consciousness, reviving his own memories.

Was this still coincidence?

"...Restia is still alive, isn't she?"

Iseria shook her head.

"I do not know. Perhaps I have merely given you a bubble of hope. Your contracted spirit, Restia Ashdoll, had disappeared completely, this is what you experienced personally, what you witness personally with your own eyes. However, suppose... Suppose a part of her remained and passed through the «Gate» to the human realm—"

"...!"

(But she—)

The left hand's spirit seal had vanished completely... Yes.

Currently, he could not even sense her presence the slightest.

A girl resembling Restia had appeared in that forest.

...That was all. There was no proof to confirm at all.

Kamito looked at the seal on his right hand.

...She's here, only here.

"That is all I have to tell you. I will leave the rest to you, Demon King's successor."

Iseria shook her head lightly and spoke.

Kamito bowed his head.

"I..."

He exhaled deeply.

It was impossible to assert that the girl was Restia.

Perhaps this would bring even deeper despair.

However—

Suddenly, Kamito felt something tug his sleeve.

Kamito looked back to find Est's mysterious violet eyes currently staring at him.

"That darkness spirit is my rival. She will not disappear so easily."

"Est..."

Est held Kamito's right hand tightly.

The hand where Restia's crest was branded—

"..."

"..."

"Yes, so..."

Kamito took a deep breath and nodded.

(...For me, my decision is already more obvious than anything.)

Indeed, no matter how small the possibility.

—No more hesitation.

Kamito turned to face Iseria and asked:

"So, where exactly is it? Where did the «Gate» appeared?"

"The boundary between the Ordesia Empire and the Holy Kingdom of Lugia, the border forest."

"The Empire and the Holy Kingdom's boundary? In other words—"

"Indeed, it is Laurenfrost territory."

Part 2

"...Mmm, ooh..."

The girl opened her eyes—

First to enter her view were the leaves covering the ground and the ceiling.

(...Where is this?)

Just as she was about to get up, she noticed.

It looked like she was lying on a bed woven from grass.

There was almost no sunlight streaming in. A dark room. Incense was burning, filling the air with a choking smell.

Her gorgeous hair of darkness draped down, scattered.

Just at this moment—

"Oh, Onee-chan has woken up!"

"Hurry and tell Rana-sama!"

Suddenly, she heard these voices.

"...?"

She looked over to the direction of the voices.

In front of the room's tiny door, a group of children was gathered.

Their snow-white complexion was reminiscent of white oak. Hair the color of green jade. Pointy ears. Pairs of shining crimson eyes were watching her in curiosity.

(...These children are?)

...She searched her memories desperately.

Why was she in this kind of place?

Before losing consciousness, she was definitely wandering in a forest, it should be something like that—

(Right, I was being chased by something...)

Gradually, her memories grew clear.

When she first woke up, it was in a cold, dark forest.

Hearing terrifying howls everywhere, she ran desperately.

She could not remember what was chasing her.

All she was certain was that she was just about to be caught by something.

(...But I tripped over something and fell.)

...That was only natural. Sitting up in bed, the girl confirmed her condition. Under the long hem of the black dress, she was wearing boots decorated with cute ribbons.

...Attire unsuited for running in the forest no matter how you looked.

Inside the dark forest, the girl could not move.

If she continued to lie down there, she would probably become food for wild beasts eventually. Or lose her life to something even more terrifying.

Indeed, just like forest spirits—

(But in the end, what I encountered were not spirits. Right, they were—)

...She remembered. They were humans.

Passing through the forest, an old human couple who were carrying firewood on their backs.

(Those two people saved me and gave me food and water—)

"Onee-chan—"

One of the children called out. The boy's clear voice brought her back to reality from her thoughts.

"Onee-chan was captured by humans."

"Yeah! That's why we rescued Onee-chan."

The children in the surroundings all nodded.

"...You rescued me?"

On the bed, the girl leaned her head forward.

"Could it be, you took those friendly elderly people and—"

The girl cried out, her face deathly pale.

"—We didn't kill them. Just scared them a bit then stole their memories."

Walking in—

A girl dressed in a princess maiden's outfit of white, roughly the same age as her.

"Rana-sama."

The children all made way for the girl who had entered. The girl named Rana walked over to the bedside and placed her hand over the awakened girl's forehead.

"Looks like you were caught in our magic too."

"...What do you mean?"

"We «Forest Dwellers» will erase human's memories if they catch sight of us."

"Forest Dwellers?"

The girl cocked her head.

"You're different from those humans?"

Hearing this question, Rana and the children all exchanged glances in surprise.

"Isn't that obvious?"

Flashing with wondrous light, those crimson eyes stared into the girl's eyes.

"—Because this is the forest of the Elfim race."

Part 3

"—You there, did you really see a girl in a black dress?"

"Y-Yes, no mistake about it..."

At the northern limits of Laurenfrost territory in the Ordesia Empire, a dense and flourishing forest grew along the border with the Holy Kingdom of Lugia. Even during the daytime, sunlight did not penetrate inside.

A small village at one end of the forest had been taken over by a band of strange people.

Girls dressed in gray overcoats.

A total of five. All carrying swords. They swept their gazes across the frightened villagers.

"...What do you think?"

The girl, apparently the commander, pointing her sword at the old man while asking her subordinates behind her.

"It is most likely that darkness spirit, no mistake about it."

"Hmph, so «Des Esseintes» turned out to be correct in their predictions—"

The girl murmured quietly to herself and turned to the old man again.

"So, you lost the girl that you rescued in the forest?"

"Y-Yes, that's right. When me and the ol' missus were walking together, dense fog suddenly came down. By the time we realized, the girl had suddenly disappeared."

The old man was trembling all over in fright, shaking his head desperately.

(...Doesn't seem to be lying, I suppose?)

The girl slowly withdrew her sword—

The Holy Kingdom's knight—Luminaris Saint Leisched—sighed in exasperation.

(Mischief wrought by forest spirits? If the darkness spirit were to fall into the hands of other powers apart from the Holy Kingdom, it would be troublesome.)

It was already a few days ago when «Des Esseintes» had confirmed the anomalous «Gate» appearing in the forest on the Ordesia Empire's border. The «Sacred Spirit Knights»'s direct superior, Cardinal Millennia Sanctus, instantly issued orders to arrest the being that had appeared near the «Gate»—the darkness spirit.

Although this was the border, it was clearly illegal for the Holy Kingdom's knights to enter Ordesia territory. If they were to be discovered, it would develop into a foreign relations problem between countries.

(Going this far to capture her, is the darkness spirit really that important?)

...All sorts of doubts swirled in her mind. But as a knight, she was not supposed to harbor doubts.

The Holy Kingdom's knights were simply executors who fully carried out the will of «Des Esseintes».

(I lost in the Blade Dance against that girl and also failed the mission to exterminate the darkness spirit.)

Before this mission is accomplished, I am probably not permitted to step back into my native soil.

In order to recover the «Sacred Spirit Knights»'s honor, I must find that darkness spirit no matter what—

"Everyone, because of that, we—"

"Luminaris-sama—"

She was interrupted by Ayla Cedar.

"What is it?"

"There are problems with invading the forest."

"What?"

Luminaris frowned—

"...Snow?"

She could not help but laugh wryly and quietly.

White snowflakes were dancing in the forest, fluttering in the air.

Even for the Laurenfrost region that was known for its cold climate, normally speaking, snow was not supposed to fall this time of the year.

A great snow contrary to seasonal norms.

"Ever since the Blade Dance ended, the Laurenfrost region's climate has been very anomalous."

"The Empire should have received the «Elemental Lords»' blessings."

"If this can be considered blessings, it's truly unacceptable—"

Although not as bad as the «Spirit Forest», this forest was also a very dangerous place. Besides, going on an expedition in this kind of weather, merely coming back alive was already uncertain.

"How about we return for now and call for reinforcements?"

Hearing her subordinate's suggestion, Luminaris shook her head.

"How could we possibly turn back empty-handed? To recover the tarnished honor of the «Sacred Spirit Knights», the darkness spirit must be captured and taken back no matter what."

Chapter 2 - Demon King's Inheritance

Part 1

As soon as he finished breakfast, Kamito began to pack his luggage for the upcoming trip to Laurenfrost lands.

"...Although it was said already, I can't believe I'm actually going to a place like Laurenfrost."

"What about a place like Laurenfrost, Kamito-san? Although it is on the Empire's border, indeed, I'll have you know that my homeland is a picturesque place with beautiful scenery."

"No, I'm sorry, you're getting the wrong idea from what I said."

Kamito frantically apologized to Rinslet.

Rinslet pouted angrily.

After possessing Fenrir earlier, Iseria's consciousness had returned to «Astral Zero» already. Due to being corroded by the otherworldly darkness, the other «Elemental Lords» required a great deal of her energy to suppress. As a result, she could only make appearances that were very limited in time.

Continuing to pack, Kamito silently prayed in his heart.

(She must still be alive, definitely—)

Accompanied by the anomalous «Gate», the girl in the black dress had appeared in the borderland forest.

...Perhaps this really was just a coincidence.

Simply speculation carrying a wonderful wish. Kamito understood clearly in his heart.

Nevertheless, he was still willing to believe in the slight possibility.

(—You must wait for me, Restia.)

Kamito secretly committed his determination while swiftly packing all the equipment needed for crossing snow-covered mountains.

The equipment was borrowed from the Academy's training room and included «Artifacts» specialized for use in snow terrain.

The shortest route to Laurenfrost territory—The Kyria Mountain Range—was currently under heavy snowfall for unknown reasons. Although back at the «Instructional School», Kamito had already undergone plenty of training for expeditions across snow terrain, he knew that crossing snow-covered mountains without appropriate equipment was equivalent to suicide.

"Well, having prepared this much, it should be enough..."

Kamito patted the bulging backpack and confirmed the equipment while talking.

"Kamito-san, please do not underestimate the Kyria Mountain Range."

Rinslet spoke with a serious expression.

"That mountain range has already taken the lives of hundreds. Although I can understand your feelings that compel you to set off as soon as possible, if you don't want to die there, no amount of preparation is too much."

"...I-I see."

Kamito gasped.

As the daughter of the margrave ruling those lands, Rinslet's words carried extra impact.

"...But I still need to thank you, Rinslet."

In the middle of packing, Kamito paused his hand and spoke.

"Eh?"

"Umm, I'm really glad that you're accompanying me."

Rinslet's face instantly turned bright red.

Just this morning, when Kamito made his decision to travel to Laurenfrost territory, Rinslet had suggested going with him because she was familiar with the local terrain and road conditions. Since it was his first time visiting Laurenfrost, Kamito could not be more glad to receive her assistance.

"Th-That would be because I was planning to go home in the first place. I-It's not like I am going back just for your sake, Kamito-san, please do not get the wrong idea."

Rinslet turned her face shyly to the side.

Already used to this kind of attitude from her, Kamito could not help but smile wryly. Despite looking like an overbearing girl at first glance, she was actually just bad at expressing her feelings. At her core, she was really a kind young lady.

"...~! W-What are you smiling at, Kamito-san?"

Rinslet glared angrily at Kamito.

"Oh, umm—"

Kamito frantically turned his gaze away.

"Speaking of which, won't Claire get mad if we take her stuff without asking?"

Kamito picked up a spirit crystal nearby and asked worriedly.

The spirit crystal he had just put in the bag was found in Claire's cupboard. Although it was an inferior item with very low purity, even so, it was still quite an indispensable tool for elementalists.

"No problem. Claire frequently eats my snacks without asking too."

"...I guess that's true."

Claire frequently took snacks to eat from Rinslet's room without permission, but she did not hog them all to herself. Using the stolen food as tea snacks, her roommates Kamito and Fianna, as well as Scarlet the actual perpetrator were all accomplices in a certain sense.

...Oh well, it should be okay given that Claire and Rinslet grew up together as childhood friends.

Despite feeling guilty, Kamito still "borrowed" the cans hidden in the depths of the cupboard. As much as he hoped it would not happen, if they actually got stranded in the snow on a mountain, this would serve as extremely precious emergency rations.

(...She should forgive me if I explain properly to her next time. It seems like she's become less violent lately.)

Meeting her older sister probably helped calm her down. Although they had met under those circumstances, in spite of that, Rubia still managed to convey her reasons for betraying the «Elemental Lords» as well as how much she missed her sister. For Claire, this could be considered some kind of salvation.

Back when Kamito first encountered her, Claire would close off her heart like a wounded little animal, always attacking others. However, that kind of personality had already disappeared now.

(...Yeah, she was a kind and gentle girl to begin with, after all.)

Just as Kamito was thinking about the girl who had already returned to her homeland...

"These spirit crystals—"

Rinslet murmured softly.

"Many of them don't have sealed spirits inside."

On closer examination, the spirit crystals in Rinslet's hands had lost their shine indeed. If crystals had spirits sealed inside them, even without infusing divine power, they should still give off a weak glow.

"Throwing them into the back of the cupboard like this, she totally failed to maintain them properly."

"...Seriously, how lazy of her despite clearly being an honors student."

Rinslet shrugged in exasperation.

Spirit crystals served as temporary residences for spirits. Hence, they must be carefully wiped and frequently undergo purification rituals to create a comfortable and relaxing atmosphere for the spirits living inside.

Otherwise, the spirits might break the seal on their own and escape. This was doubly true for poor quality spirit crystals like these ones.

"Then I shall head over to the «Spirit Forest» to catch a few fire spirits."

"Yeah, I'll go find that hag Greyworth to get permission to leave."

Saying that, Kamito took down Terminus Est that was hanging on the wall.

"Going to the school building?"

"—I'm guessing she's probably at the Academy Town."

Part 2

Leaving the Academy's front gates, Kamito stepped onto the main road that went through the entire Academy Town.

"...It's already four days huh."

Looking at the wide streets at the foot of the mountain, Kamito muttered quietly.

Using the «Great Festival of the Spirits» as an opening, seven militarized spirits had attacked the Academy Town. Even the Imperial Knights' tactical-class militarized spirit «Glasya-Labolas» was corrupted by darkness and had gone on a rampage, wrecking the town.

The wrecked town's reconstruction was being carried out under the leadership of the Imperial Knights. However, the most heavily damaged «Undine Area» was still a wasteland.

Walking on the rubble-buried road, Kamito saw the figure of a familiar rock spirit. Its giant rock-covered body was currently clearing away scattered soil and stones.

"I see, this should be moved over to... Hmm?"

Riding on the rock giant's shoulder, the short-haired girl looked back. It was Rakka from the «Sylphid Knights».

"...My, isn't this Kamito? What are you doing here?"

"Just looking for Greyworth for something."

Rakka jumped down lightly from the rock giant's shoulder.

"She's helping with the town's revival work. How amazing."

"This «Cabraca» is really suited to this kind of work, you know?"

Hmph, Rakka puffed out her chest with pride.

"I have to work hard enough to do the Captain's share as well while she's recuperating."

"Ellis did say she had to get back to the Knights' duties as quickly as possible."

Injured in the attack incident earlier, Ellis was currently receiving treatment at the Academy Town's medical facility. Although she had insisted she was fine, Ellis definitely suffered corrosion from Lurie Lizaldia's demon sword. Having inherited the Demon King's power, Kamito was a totally separate matter.

"The Seraelle Hospital has the most advanced medical facilities, so she should be discharged soon."

"You should go visit her, Kamito. I think the Captain will definitely be happy to see you."

"Yeah, I'll pay her a visit later."

Bidding Rakka goodbye, Kamito continued on his way.

Finally, he reached his destination—a military installation under the Imperial Knights' jurisdiction.

"Is Greyworth here?"

"Oh it's you. She should be present every day during this time—"

After showing his authorized pass to the guard, Kamito entered the facility successfully. Due to a top-level alert, the only people allowed into the underground installation were Greyworth and Kamito.

Guided by the light from spirit crystals on the walls, Kamito followed the underground passage.

The atmosphere underground was exceptionally oppressive. No matter what, this was a facility used for military research during the Ranbal War.

(...Such a creepy place, I can't believe she's still coming here every day.)

After walking for a while, he saw Greyworth's figure in the distance, holding a lantern.

Probably hearing Kamito's footsteps, Greyworth looked back.

"So it's you, lad."

"Yeah~ Don't you get tired of visiting this kind of place every day?"

This was a wide open space in the underground passage. The surrounding walls were crumbling and the ground surface was also sunken.

The center of the destruction was where Kamito had battled Lurie last time.

Stepping on debris underfoot, Kamito walked over to Greyworth.

"You should bring a bodyguard at least. Clearly you're no longer the continent's strongest witch."

"Oh? The lad is worrying about me?"

"You're overthinking it."

Kamito averted his gaze.

"Hoo~, in the end, you're more adorable when you lost your memory."

Greyworth shrugged and looked up at the ceiling of the devastated underground space.

"I wouldn't want anyone aside from myself to come here."

Kamito followed her gaze.

For no particular reason, simply due to the endless darkness spreading from there...

However, he could feel a vague sense of dissonance.

There seemed to be something there.

Greyworth probably felt it too.

"The Demon King's «Burial Chamber» huh..."

The «Burial Chamber»—a treasure vault bestowed to eligible Demon Kings.

That was what Lurie Lizaldia had mentioned.

Sealing away the possessions of the Demon King from a thousand years ago, it was a special dimension with magical properties. At the same time, it was the place where Est had been sealed when Kamito had lost his memories at the sanctuary of the «Elemental Lords».

The place where Est had been sealed.

It automatically manifested at the Demon King's base of operations. Only those possessing true eligibility to become the Demon King were able to unseal it.

"Truly quite an unbelievable dimension. No matter what system of magic, it cannot be analyzed."

Greyworth nodded, slightly impressed, then looked back at Kamito.

"Lad, try using your power to activate the «Burial Chamber»."

"It's not like it's that easy to do."

Kamito shrugged helplessly.

There was no way for Kamito to open the «Burial Chamber» by his own will—Lurie had said so. Hence, she only barely managed to activate the «Burial Chamber» by resorting to the method of putting Kamito in a desperate crisis on the verge of death.

"...Indeed, it's still no good the way you are currently."

"There's no use provoking me. Besides, I don't need that kind of thing."

"Are you sure? Sleeping inside there are absurdly powerful spirits, you know?"

The «Burial Chamber»—The Demon King's treasure vault. If that were really the case, it was highly likely that the seventy-two spirits commanded by the legendary Demon King «Solomon» were sealed inside.

Although a large part of the Demon King's spirits had gone missing, rumor had it that some were sealed while others were modified into militarized spirits, there should be some left inside the «Burial Chamber».

However—

"...Don't need them."

Worn at his waist, the «Demon Slayer» spoke.

"...Est?"

"Kamito already has me as the Demon King's weapon of choice and does not need any rubbish spirits."

A tone of absolute certainty. Calling the Demon King's spirits rubbish, this was Est who had slain the Demon King as the Sacred Maiden's personal sword.

"...So that's the way it is. I don't need whatever Demon King's spirits."

Kamito patted the sword at his waist lightly while he spoke.

"Is that so? Oh well, if that's the case, never mind. Then let's seal off this area first."

Speaking with slight disappointment, Greyworth—

"Say, why exactly did you come to find me?"

Only then did Kamito remember—

"Oh yeah..."

That was close. He had almost forgot his initial reason for coming here.

Kamito hastily took out the request form from his shirt pocket.

"I'd like long-term permission for leaving school grounds. Sign here please."

Reading the request form, Greyworth made a surprised look.

"Laurenfrost?"

"Yeah, there's something urgent."

Kamito repeated what Iseria had said this morning about the girl resembling Restia who was sighted in Laurenfrost.

Things regarding the «Elemental Lords» were an absolute taboo from Iseria's perspective, so Kamito skillfully avoided this subject.

After listening to Kamito, Greyworth said:

"Lad, is this information reliable?"

"...Probably, I guess."

Kamito nodded vaguely.

"I have heard that heavy snow is currently falling in the Kyria Mountain Range leading to Laurenfrost. Will I permit my precious students to go somewhere so dangerous for the sake of such uncertain information?"

"...One time in the past, a certain person was apparently thrown into a snow-covered mountain for many days as so-called training. I wonder if you still remember?"

"That's long long ago. Forget it."

Seeing Greyworth still making that look, Kamito sighed helplessly.

"...I also know that this news is very low in certainty. However, as long as there's a shred of hope, I—"

Kamito clenched his fist hard.

"Sigh—"

Greyworth gazed at Kamito with gentle eyes.

"You're always so concerned about that darkness spirit... It makes me feel a little envious."

Snickering.

"...Then so be it. But when little miss hell cat returns, won't she be mad at you?"

"If it's Claire, I'm counting on you to explain to her when the time comes."

"I'm sorry but I probably won't be able to help. I will be leaving the Academy soon."

"Leaving the Academy at a time like this?"

Kamito frowned.

The school was being rebuilt currently. During a time like this, Greyworth should be needed even more as the Academy's director.

"Precisely because it's a time like this. You should have heard from Fianna too about the «All Nations Conference» to be held at the imperial capital. The continent is currently in an unprecedented state of emergency."

"The coup d'etat at the Theocracy huh..."

Several days earlier, Sjora Kahn had murdered the hierarch in the neighboring Alphas Theocracy. Furthermore, she had taken command of the demon scorpion palace «Scorpia». Very clearly, the upheaval was not going to subside with that. The hierarch faction in the Theocracy was rioting all over the place, starting wars everywhere, plunging the nation into chaos.

"There are also reasons on that front, but my true worries lie over with the Holy Kingdom instead."

"...The Holy Kingdom of Lugia?"

Hearing unexpected words from the witch's lips, Kamito tilted his head in puzzlement.

Speaking of the Holy Kingdom of Lugia, it was a very stable country like Ordesia. Ever since the Principality of Rossvale declared independence, nothing concerning had been heard from there in recent years—

"—A witch's intuition."

Greyworth narrowed her gray eyes.

"It's the same feeling I experienced just before that war. At this «All Nations Conference», I am going to personally verify the Holy Kingdom's inclinations. Kamito—"

Part 3

(...A witch's intuition huh.)

Holding the signed permit, Kamito returned to the ground surface, taking a deep breath of fresh air.

(...Oh well, it's got nothing to do with me, I guess.)

For Kamito, how political issues between countries ended up had nothing to do with him. However, if it was related to searching for Restia, then it would be a different matter—

Hunching his body slightly, Kamito walked over to the shopping street in the «Sylphid Area».

Food ingredients and other daily necessities could be bought here. In fact, students at the Academy almost never came here to shop. Most of the

consumers here were residents of the Academy Town. But for Kamito who was not a noble, this was an important place for buying cheap food.

Luckily, because it was quite far from the heart of the Academy City and there were no military installations nearby, the attack several days earlier did not affect this place.

Kamito had come here to buy a gift for visiting Ellis. Because he was leaving the Academy temporarily, it was only natural for him to inform Ellis who was his teammate as well as the captain of the «Sylphid Knights» he was a member of.

After buying Ellis' favorite honeydew melon at a grocery store, Kamito made his way to the facility where she was hospitalized.

«Saint Seraelle Hospital»—The facility was named after a «Queen» who had served Holy Lord Alexandros several centuries ago. Although Areishia Spirit Academy's hospital also had high standards, it was still far inferior to Seraelle Hospital.

Kamito went through the front door to enter the building's center. The girl at the reception was so frightened that she gasped.

"...T-The bestial king of lust!"

This was already his fourth time visiting Ellis. Kamito's appearance was apparently committed firmly to memory by now.

(...If possible, could you please remember my name as well?)

Feeling deeply hurt, Kamito finished handling the visiting procedures then walked to Ellis's sickroom.

Knocking lightly at the door, Kamito asked softly:

"Ellis, are you still awake?"

"...Yes. K-Kamito!? Oh, yes. I am awake!"

After a clatter of noises, her frantic answer was heard.

"Okay, then I'm coming in—"

Opening the door, Kamito saw Ellis lying in the sickbed.

"...Kamito!"

Her pink lips parted slightly, dressed in a loose white gown, her ponytail untied, Ellis looked quite different from usual, almost like a scene from fantasy.

"Ellis, how's your health?"

"O-Okay. I have almost recovered... I should be able to get back to my duties at the Knights soon."

"Really? ...That's great."

Kamito sat down on the chair next to the sickbed. Ellis's face seemed a bit red.

"I bought your favorite, Ellis, honeydew melon. I'll cut it up for you right away."

"...O-Okay. I feel so sorry for troubling you all the time."

"Ellis, it's thanks to you that I'm still standing here. So just leave this kinda stuff to me."

Kamito took out a knife from his shirt pocket and sliced the melon into small pieces, arranging them on a plate in an experienced manner.

"Speaking of which, what were you doing just now?"

"...Huh?"

"Before I entered the room, I think I heard a clatter of noises. If I disturbed you, I'll apologize—"

"...~! That was, u-umm... nothing I was doing, nothing at all, honestly!"

Ellis went bright red in embarrassment, turning on her side in bed. At this moment, something fell out of her shirt.

"...!?"

Ellis frantically went to pick them up... But it was too late.

Kamito's gaze stopped on the books fallen on the bed.

"...«Nectar Dripping in the Night»?"

Kamito seemed to recall seeing Claire read this novel a few days ago.

"T-This, this is not what you think!"

Ellis frantically picked up the books and stuffed them under her shirt.

"T-These are, umm... books confiscated by the Knights, I was just, umm, checking them! ..."

"I-I understand."

Glared at by Ellis, Kamito kept nodding.

"B-By the way, have some melon—"

"..."

Ellis stared at the plate carrying the sliced melon..... Apparently at a loss of words, she was acting very awkward.

"...? What's the matter, no appetite?"

"No, umm, my hand... cannot move very well."

Ellis suddenly said that.

"...? Weren't you fine just now?"

"I-It suddenly started hurting!"

Ellis pouted.

"So, umm, basically... umm..."

"Hmm?"

"Y-You can... feed me, right?"

"...!"

Ellis lowered her head and looked up into Kamito's eyes.

Faint glimpses of her cleavage flashed in and out of view, drawing Kamito's gaze coercively.

"...Y-You refuse...?"

With an uneasy expression, Ellis bit her lip hard.

Seeing her ask in this manner, how could Kamito possibly refuse—

"...I-I get it, okay."

Kamito shrugged helplessly and used a fork to pick up a piece of melon.

"...Here, open wide."

"Hmm, are you ordering me?"

Ellis was pouting but she actually looked a bit happy.

"Hmm, the tone of an order does not feel bad, actually..."

...Ah~

"...Mmmmmm~♪"

Swallowing the melon, Ellis held her hands to her cheeks in bliss.

"A-Another..."

Like a young chick waiting to be fed, she parted her adorable lips.

"...I surrender. Here~"

...Ah~



"...Huah~♪"

Ellis made another cute sound.

"...Looks like you really love eating melon."

"N-Not exactly. What I love is not the melon but..."

Ahem~ Due to being too embarrassed, Ellis cleared her throat deliberately.

Kamito put down the fork and said:

"Umm, Ellis. I've got something to tell you—

"W-What is it!?"

"I'll be leaving the Academy for a while."

"...Eh?"

Ellis widened her dark-brown eyes, so shocked that she could not speak.

Facing Ellis, Kamito recounted what had happened this morning.

"...Because of that, I have to visit Laurenfrost to search for Restia. As for when I'll be back, I still don't know yet—"

"...I-I see."

After listening to Kamito, Ellis nodded obediently.

"If possible, I would like to go with you—"

"O-Oh~ I'm very glad that you want to do that, but given your current state of health, I don't think you should push yourself that much."

Saying that, Kamito stroked Ellis's head.

"...~!"

Ellis's face seemed to be giving off steam.

"Then I'll be—"

"H-Hold on, Kamito—"

Ellis grabbed Kamito's hand just as he was getting up to leave.

"...Ellis?"

"Umm, if you are going on a long journey, it would be more convenient to be enchanted with «Wind's Protection»."

"...Oh, that'd be wonderful if you can, but..."

Among all kinds of spirit blessings, «Wind's Protection» was the one most prized by travelers. Turning the surrounding wind into one's allies, it would also improve movement speed.

"But is it really okay?"

Among different kinds of spirit magic, magic that persisted for long durations also consumed massive amounts of divine power. Hence, Kamito could not allow Ellis to push herself in her hospitalized state.

"Do not worry. My physical body aside, my energy has already recovered fully thanks to the princess maidens."

Ellis nodded and finally released Kamito's hand.

"...Please close your eyes for a moment."

"Oh sure..."

Kamito closed his eyes obediently.

He could hear the sound of Ellis beginning to chant prayers near his ear.

"O wind sweeping across the land, please bestow upon this traveler thy protection—"

A gentle breeze blew in the room, caressing Kamito's face. His entire body was enveloped in the mild wind—

Smooch~

"...Huh?"

Suddenly feeling a soft sensation from his lips, Kamito opened his eyes wide in surprise.

"...~!"

He could see Ellis, her face flushed red—

"...E-Ellis?"

Kamito blinked—

"Y-You have the kind of constitution that renders magic ineffective unless this is done, right?"

Ellis shyly shifted her gaze away and said.

"That's... true, but..."

"H-Hmph... «Wind's Protection» is granted to you without fail now!"

Ignoring Kamito who was totally lost, Ellis frantically buried her face in her clothes.

Part 4

(...«Wind's Protection» huh?)

Exiting the hospital, Kamito scratched his face and muttered.

...His heart was beating so fast. The sensation of those gentle lips still seemed to linger.

"—Kamito has no fidelity."

Worn at his waist, the sacred sword complained unhappily.

"M-Misunderstanding! Ellis was just giving me «Wind's Protection»."

"«Steel's Protection» alone is enough for guarding Kamito!"

...Est did not say anything after that, completely in a sulk.

"...Well, anyway, it was a great help."

If going on a journey, being able to lend the power of wind was worth celebrating. Because under the action of wind, there was a dramatic increase in speed.

"Next, I guess I'll go help Rinslet catch spirits."

Saying that, Kamito walked towards the Academy.

"—The very image of the Demon King of the Night as always. Kazehaya Kamito."

"...!"

A jeering voice. Kamito hastily looked at the voice's direction.

Out from the shadows of the building, a petite girl with a boyish haircut emerged.

"...Ugh, it's you, Virrey Branford!"

Kamito's face was very awkward.

She was number nine of the Empire's elite spirit knights—«Numbers».

A special operative knight who belonged to the «Umbra» agency that specialized in foreign intelligence operations.

She was under orders from the Empire's top echelons to monitor Kamito. From Kamito's perspective, she was someone whom he wanted to avoid like the plague.

"What do you mean by 'ugh,' Kazehaya Kamito?"

"Oh, umm..."

The special operative knight stared at Kamito, walking in front of him nonchalantly.

"I saw you enter the sickroom of Duke Fahrengart's granddaughter... Could it be that you were engaged in something shameless and immoral?"

"...You've been following me all this time huh."

Nothing less expected from the dark side of «Numbers», although she was hiding her presence in the Academy Town, to think that even Kamito had failed to notice her.

"Stop talking about made up things, how could I possibly do something shameless and immoral?"

Kamito denied firmly. Indeed, it was just a ritual necessary for «Wind's Protection». Definitely not something shameless and immoral... Probably.

"Your eyes are wavering, Kazehaya Kamito."

...True to her name as a knight of Umbra, she saw with a single look.

"In my view, your getup is even more shameless."

"Wha...!?"

Kamito was forced to retaliate, forcing the «Numbers» girl to go red with embarrassment.

In actual fact, the highly revealing black leather suit made Kamito at a loss where he should look.

"T-This was developed specially for combat, the combat outfit for special operative knights!"

Virrey drew her handgun from her waist and pointed it at Kamito.

"How dare you look at me with such lewd eyes, you, you bestial king of lust!"

"Hey, pulling out a gun on the streets is very dangerous."

Kamito took Virrey's gun and held it up high.

"G-Give it back. Bad guy!"

It looked like it was really very precious to her. Virrey suddenly burst into tears, jumping up and down trying to snatch her gun back. But very unfortunately, her height was totally not enough.

"Before I do that, let me ask you something... Why are you still in town?"

Holding the gun up high, Kamito asked. According to what Greyworth had said, she should have gone to chase the escaped Lurie.

"...!"

Virrey was speechless for a moment. Then—

"The mission for apprehending Dame Lurie has been... called off."

With a trembling voice, mixed with regret.

"...What on earth happened?"

Although it was true that she had failed to realize Lurie was a spy, that was not her fault alone. As a special operative knight, there should be no one more suited than her for hunt down Lurie.

"Those are orders from above, demanding «Umbr» to cease hunting Dame Lurie."

"...No way, how can the culprit who caused such a huge incident be... just like that..."

Kamito could not help but cry out... Suddenly hearing such an unacceptable thing.

"Of course, I have suggested continuing the hunt to the higher-ups. However, totally set aside. 'With the «All Nations Conference» coming up, do not make a big deal out of this matter.' That was the answer from above. I am very concerned whether the higher-ups are hiding something."

(The Empire's top echelons are shielding Lurie on purpose—Is that it?)

If the Empire's interior—in other words, there were traitors in the council—it made sense how Lurie was able to lurk in the Empire for so long.

Besides, Lurie Lizaldia—who on earth was that woman?

While Kamito was in deep thought, Virrey finally snatched her gun back.

"It would still be okay if she's still in the area near the Theocracy, but as soon as she crosses the border, there's nothing we can do about her. We have also lost touch with «Umbra» spies who have infiltrated «Murders»."

"Is it because of that coup d'etat as well...?"

Under these chaotic conditions, trying to hide one's tracks was probably not a hard thing.

"About her past, did you manage to dig up anything?"

Virrey shook her head.

"Seven years ago, she appeared in the Empire and was called the miraculous healer. But how she infiltrated the Empire, how she was recruited to «Numbers», regarding her past, everything is still unknown."

"...I see, come to think of it—do you have any idea about the name Yggdra?"

"Yggdra?"

Virrey stared at Kamito with a very surprised look.

"...Yeah. During the attack on the Academy, that girl in vestments mentioned the name... Have you heard of it?"

The girl with the eyepatch, host to the «Otherworldly Darkness»—Millennia Sanctus. On the day of the «Great Festival of the Spirits», she was the main culprit who had summoned the militarized spirits, letting slip of that name in front of Kamito.

"Could it be that Yggdra failed?"—That was what she said.

That name might be linked to Lurie's true identity perhaps.

"Any idea would be an understatement—"

Virrey said with a surprised face:

"—That's the name of the «Blade Dance» winner fifteen years ago."

"...Huh?"

An unexpected answer—Kamito could not help but make a weird sound.

Greyworth was the winner of the «Blade Dance» twenty-four years ago.

Then three years ago, Ren Ashbell was the winner.

But there was also a «Blade Dance» held fifteen years ago.

The country that had obtained victory fifteen years ago should be—

(...The Holy Kingdom of Lugia, right?)

In any case, Lurie currently looked about twenty-five years in age right now. Based on that, she could not possibly have competed in the «Blade Dance» fifteen years earlier... That was probably no relation to her at all.

"Seriously, this is just a deduction based on ordinary common sense. Oh well, compared to the «Dusk Witch» and «Ren Ashbell» the Strongest Blade Dancer, Yggdra-sama is not very famous, but that can't be helped either—"

Virrey shrugged.

"If it bothers you, I could go investigate it. I will be returning to the imperial capital next."

"Back to the capital?"

"My latest mission is to serve as the bodyguard for Dame Greyworth who is participating in the «All Nations Conference». Although she has already retired, she is still highly influential."

"...I see. If it's the imperial capital, that would be completely opposite the direction to Laurenfrost."

Saying that, Kamito exhaled deeply.

...In any case, he would not need to be monitored by this girl anymore.

"...Hmm? Could it be that you're going to Laurenfrost?"

Virrey raised an eyebrow and asked.

"Oh, yeah..."

"Are you tired of living? The Kyria Mountain Range is currently being ravaged by a great snowstorm of unknown cause, you know?"

"I know that too. Oh well, since I've got someone reliable to lead the way, there probably won't be a problem, I think."

"...Hmph, not like your life or death is any of my business."

"Oh, speaking of Laurenfrost—"

Virrey casually thought of something and said:

"«Umbr» has apparently received reports that the Holy Kingdom's knights have been discovered in the forest near the border."

"...What?"

Kamito's face instantly went livid.

"—Hold on, please tell me the details about this report."

"Uwah...! Your face is too close, Kazehaya Kamito!"

Kamito suddenly leaned up close, causing Virrey's face to blush bright red.

"I recently heard about the Holy Kingdom's knights appearing near the border. Had it been normal times, the Empire would surely raise objections on grounds of territorial invasion. But since it's the sensitive period of the

«All Nations Conference» right now, to avoid provoking the Holy Kingdom, the higher-ups have apparently decided to just watch for now—"

"Is it Luminaris Saint Leisched's team?"

"Seems to be—"

Kamito released Virrey's shoulder.

(...Why are the Holy Kingdom's knights appearing in Laurenfrost now?)

...A foreboding sense. During the «Blade Dance», the «Sacred Spirit Knights» led by Luminaris had taken action to exterminate Restia.

...This was absolutely no coincidence.

(...Now's not the time to be dallying leisurely.)

Part 5

"O «Salamander» born from primordial flames, I hereby beseech thee to make thy way here—"

Hidden behind a tree, the salamander spirit entered the spirit crystal in her hand with a whoosh.

Behind the school building, Rinslet was currently preparing indispensable fire spirits for crossing snow-covered mountains.

"...Hoo, spirits in the area have reduced greatly in number too."

"Probably affected by the attack several days earlier, it looks like the forest's trees have been contaminated."

The maid Carol answered.

Just as she pointed out, the damaged tree's edges had already turned black.

Spirits would not live in hated land that was contaminated by darkness. Although the princess maidens tried to use prayers for purification, returning things to the way they were would still require a very long time.

"At this rate, the sun will be going down. Should we go deeper into the forest?"

"Yes, milady."

As Rinslet walked into the depths of the forest, Carol followed in a patter of footsteps.

That said, students were only allowed into the outskirts of the «Spirit Forest». Going deeper, not only the «Sylphid Knights» but even teachers were not permitted to enter.

After walking briefly in the forest—

"...Umm, Carol."

"Yes, milady."

Rinslet stopped walking and coughed once.

"I-I am about to go on a journey with Kamito-san, just the two of us..."

"Yes."

"U-Umm. Going on a journey with a boy, this will actually be the first time. To be honest, it is a bit unsettling."

Indeed, in actual fact, Rinslet was very nervous right now.

"No problem, milady. I've heard that journeys will help deepen feelings between opposite genders."

Carol smiled "fufu~"

"...! W-What deepening feelings, nothing of that sort is within my considerations at all!"

Rinslet denied with her face red. Carol whispered into her ear:

"...A small trip with only milady and Kamito-sama alone. This is a great chance to get ahead of everyone else!"

"I-I did not propose accompanying Kamito-san for such reasons!"

Rinslet turned around guiltily.

"Indeed, I simply, simply want to become Kamito-san's strength, that is all—"

(...But was that really the case?)

Kamito was always surrounded by many cute girls—

Rinslet had almost no opportunity to spend time alone with Kamito.

But this time, it was a small trip just the two of them.

...It would be lying if she said she was not looking forward to this at all.

(...Although Est-san is with us, she's almost always sleeping during the day.)

Her heart could not help but pound.

...Speaking of which, the novel she had borrowed from Claire a few days earlier was about a man of low status falling in love with a highborn young lady. While they were eloping, resting together, the couple had naturally embraced tightly in bed—

(...Ah, w-what manner of perverted delusions am I imagining!?)

Huff... Huff... Huff...!

Rinslet shook her head forcefully. Just at this time—

"—Rinslet!"

"K-Kamito-san!?"

On the forest trail, Kamito ran over frantically.

"...Sorry, can we set off immediately?"

"...Eh? But I still haven't collected enough fire spirits."

"These ones we have on hand are enough. Let's set off now."

"Why are you suddenly so impatient to leave?"

"Apart from us, there seem to be others searching for Restia."

"Huh?"

Kamito briefly explained about the Holy Kingdom's knights appearing near the border.

"...! Now is definitely not the time for slow preparations."

Rinslet nodded and turned to face Carol.

"I am leaving the rest to you, Carol."

"Yes, please rest assured, milady."

Carol nodded solemnly.

"Then let us depart, Kamito-san—"

"Yeah!"

Part 6

On the grass-woven bed, the girl opened her eyes.

She had already changed out of her torn dress of black and was currently wearing black clothing prepared by the «Forest Dwellers». This outfit only consisted of simple cloth wrapped around the chest and the waist. The more she looked at it the more it seemed like being half-naked.

Even so, she did not feel cold at all, apparently because this type of fabric was blessed by forest spirits.

"Spirits—I definitely know of existences like them."

As though confirming her memories, she murmured softly.

"Existing in another world different from this realm, special beings—"

Her memories related to this realm only consisted of lingering fragments. For example, the being known as humans—they were the most flourishing race in this world.

(...At the same time, they are the ones hunting for me.)

—However, she had virtually no memories about herself.



After waking up in the forest, her only memory was the single word "Restia."

Saying the word aloud gave her a mysterious, nostalgic feeling, just this single word.

...Hence, this was probably her own name.

(Saying that I've lost my memory because of these children's memory manipulating magic—)

But that was not the truth. Several days earlier, when she appeared in this forest, she was already unable to recall the past.

The girl sighed and sat up from bed.

Inside a tent made from animal hide, some kind of herb was burning. The choking smell stimulated her nerves. Perhaps this was used for some kind of ritual.

Then she walked out of the tent to the outside. Stretching endlessly was a vast forest of frost-covered trees, frozen all the way to the branches.

Frozen branches hanging on the trees resembled blooming flowers, hence this place was known as the «Forest of Ice Blossoms».

In this forest, the children of the «Forest Dwellers» were playing.

Incredibly, this village consisted only of children. The eldest was perhaps the princess maiden known as Rana.

(...Or perhaps, this is what the Elfim race is like.)

There were no memories about the Elfim race in her mind. From Rana, she had learned that unlike humans, the Elfim was a race that had come from «Astral Zero».

The children playing in the forest noticed her and waved. She waved back amiably.

The «Forest Dwellers» were all very friendly. Not only did they offer her shelter from being hunted by humans, but also offered warm hospitality to her.

...But she still did not know why they saved her.

"Restia-san—"

She suddenly heard a girl's voice.

Looking back, Restia found the princess maiden Rana standing behind her, staring at her.

"Don't walk outside carelessly. The forest is a very dangerous place."

"...Sorry."

Restia apologized honestly.

Then she turned to look at the children playing in the forest again.

"...It seems, there's only children here."

"The adults here were driven out several decades ago in a war against the humans. We princess maidens of the Elfim were able to stay here due to wielding elemental powers."

Rana bit her lip with chagrin, her voice filled with resentment.

"Do you hate humans very much?"

"All of us «Forest Dwellers» are like this. Because the humans of the continent want to take away our forests..."

"In that case, why did you still save me?"

"...Huh?"

Hearing Restia's question, Rana tilted her head in puzzlement.

"Because, I'm human too."

"That's because..."

Restia's dusk-colored eyes stared straight into Rana's crimson eyes.

Dusk-colored eyes—At least, Restia was certain that she was not part of the Elfim race.

Rana's wavering eyes carried hesitation—

"Because you resemble a certain esteemed one very much."

...

"A certain esteemed one?"

"Yes, the «Queen of Ice Blossoms»."

"Queen?"

Restia repeated the word without thinking. This was the first time she had heard of a queen in this village.

"She's not one of the «Forest Dwellers»?"

"No, the «Queen of Ice Blossoms» is not one of the Elfim. However, she is not human either. Although called human, yet different from humans, in this regard, you are very similar to her."

"Although called human... yet different from humans."

Restia was confused... It was getting more and more incomprehensible.

(Also, very similar to me...)

"Okay, let's go in and have a good long talk. I'll brew you some tea."

Saying that, Rana entered the tent and sat down on the fur rug.

Then she recounted the story of the girl known as the «Queen of Ice Blossoms».

—This had happened before Restia's appearance in the forest.

Like Restia, the girl had lost her way in the forest. She possessed a miraculous power, inconceivable to the Elfim race. Unbelievably, the «Ice Dragon», thought to be extinct in Laurenfrost, would obey her control.

"...Control dragons?"

"Ice dragons are the minions of «Zirnitra», the guardian spirit of «Forest Dwellers». Being able to control ice dragons at will, she must be the princess maiden sent by «Zirnitra», the true princess maiden we have been looking forward to for centuries—"

Rana spoke in an excited tone of voice. She seemed like she really worshiped that girl.

Putting aside the matter of the guardian spirit's princess maiden—Restia was very intrigued by the topic of the «Queen of Ice Blossoms».

...Perhaps she might recall something if she carefully dug into her memories.

"If only I could meet this «Queen of Ice Blossoms» directly."

"Yes, you will have a chance to meet her eventually."

Rana nodded.

"...I can't meet her now?"

"She is currently in slumber. The «Queen of Ice Blossoms» will not wake up unless she sleeps for a period of time."

"...What do you mean?"

"The «Queen of Ice Blossoms» is currently forced to store up power for a certain important ritual. So she has been sleeping in the «Forest Dwellers»'s shrine for a while now."

"...I see. That's too bad then."

"But she should be waking up soon. In a few more days."

"A few more days..."

Restia fell into deep thought.

"I don't want to stay here for too long—"

"...Eh? Why is that?"

Rana widened her eyes in surprise.

"Those human pursuers must still be hunting for me."

Continuing to stay here would bring trouble for everyone.

"Don't worry about that at all. This forest has an ancient «Barrier». Even elementalists have no way of finding this place. Also—"

Saying that, she looked at Restia.

"Imminently, the «Queen of Ice Blossoms» will revive «Zirnitra» who is sleeping in the Kyria Mountain Range. Once we obtain the guardian spirit's power, there is nothing to fear from humans at all."

Chapter 3 - Team Inferno Reborn

Part 1

—A few days prior to Kamito and Rinslet's departure from the Academy...
Claire returned to her homeland by herself—The former territory of Elstein.
"Father and Mother are here, right..."

In front of a small house by the riverside, Claire pressed her hand against her chest, adjusting her breathing, trying to calm down.

It was already four years since she was separated from her parents. Four years ago, due to the «Calamity Queen»'s betrayal, Claire's parents were stripped of their noble status and thrown into the imperial capital's Balsas Prison.

Due to having served the Ordesia imperial family for many years, they were not treated like other convicts of heavy crimes despite being imprisoned. With only their freedom restricted, it was a state more akin to house arrest.

However, these long years of prison life finally came to an end recently. During the Blade Dance held earlier, the Ordesia Empire's team had obtained victory. As the leader of the winning team, Claire Rouge was rewarded by the Empire.

Naturally, Claire's wish was a pardon for her parents.

The Empire's council was greatly divided over this matter, hence her wish did receive an official response. But due to the increased prestige and influence of the second princess, Fianna's words now held greater weight and finally under her efforts, Claire's parents finally regained their freedom.

However, their noble title was not restored and their castle and lands were taken by the Empire. All that was left for the Elstein family was a small patch of land and this house.

Compared to their former castle, this was a very modest house.

Standing at the door to the house, Claire looked around nervously.

She pressed the spirit crystal at the door. After a brief wait, the door opened slowly inwards.

Inside the tiny home, Claire's parents came to the door to greet her, dressed in simple clothes.

"—Welcome home, Claire."

"...You've grown so much now."

"Father, Mother..."

Hugging her parents tightly, Claire cried her heart out like a little child.

Part 2

Dinner that night consisted of potato and bacon stew, walnut bread, boiled eggs and pheasant roasted until its skin was crisp. Dessert was Claire's favorite peach tart.

There was no need to reminisce about former dinners eaten in the Elstein castle. Although this meal was very simple, to Claire, her mother's cooking was more delicious than anything in the world.

Sitting around the table in the room, there were too many things to talk about after being separated for four years.

Life in the prep school, enrolling in Areishia Spirit Academy, entering the «Blade Dance», also about Kamito—

"Eating canned food all the time is not good for your health."

Her mother reminded with care and concern.

"I-I've already started cooking recently."

Claire puffed out her chest proudly.

"...Really? In a previous letter, you even said there was a boy who cooked for you—"

"Y-Yeah, that's—"

Claire's gaze began to wander and she mumbled her words.

"Or perhaps, you mean you're cooking particularly for that Kamito child?"

"...Hmm?"

Duke Elstein seemed to catch on to a sensitive topic.

"N-No way. Why on earth would I cook particularly for him—"

Blushing red, Claire shook her head vigorously.

"Is that so...?"

"K-Kamito is just a slave... And a teammate, that's all! Anyway, putting that aside—"

Claire coughed lightly, hastily changing the subject.

"I met Ren Ashbell in this time's «Blade Dance»."

"...Ohoh, the girl who placated the «Fire Elemental Lord»'s wrath."

"Yeah... I worship her very much. This time, I finally got to meet her."

With great fervor, Claire kept telling her parents about her(him). Not the «Strongest Blade Dancer» she idolized from three years ago but the Ren Ashbell who had fight alongside her as a teammate.

"She(he) is stronger and kinder than anyone. A very gallant person—"

Only when talking about Ren Ashbell was she the most able to express the feelings in her heart with honesty and forthrightness.

(W-What should I do, these feelings in my heart are suddenly surging forth...)

In the middle of the conversation, noticing her feelings towards Kamito, Claire's face went fiery hot.

Even so, she still continued to talk about her(his) deeds...

These feelings, suppressed for such a long time, flowed out in a torrent.

(...So these are my true feelings huh?)

Claire pressed hard against her chest.

...These were the true feelings she was unable to convey to Kamito's face.

The feelings that she had always kept buried in the bottom of her heart ever since their first encounter by the spring in the Spirit Forest.

"When I was alone, she(he) reached out to me..."

Indeed, Kamito had always stayed by Claire's side.

Protecting Claire.

"...She(he) is the one I love."

Claire blushed to her ears.

"Is that so—?"

Smiling, her mother caressed Claire's scorching hair.

"...You've made very good friends, I see."

"Y-Yes!"

After having dinner, Claire went to sleep, squeezing onto the same bed as her mother.

Like when she was young, Claire hugged her mother's arm.

She had been hesitant whether she should tell her parents about her sister. But if she did that, it would involve the matter of the «Elemental Lords» going insane. About the «Otherworldly Darkness» eating away at this world, the water elemental lord had forbid them to tell anyone else.

(...Mother, I will surely bring Nee-sama back.)

Held in her mother's arms, Claire secretly steeled her determination.

Part 3

Balsas Prison was a fortress prison situated on the north side of the imperial capital.

All inmates of this impregnable prison were either high-ranked nobles in the country or elementalists who had contravened the Empire's laws. Hence, unlike ordinary prisons, multiple layers of barriers for sealing spirit magic were erected here.

At the deepest level of this prison, a place where not the slightest light seeped through—

"I heard someone upstairs got pardoned. How lame."

The voice of an arrogant youth.

"Hey, you think so too, right?"

Doing one-handed pushups, the youth struck up conversation with his neighboring inmate.

"...I don't care. No matter what, I'm on a life sentence."

The woman who replied had crimson eyes and jade-green hair.

Vivian Melosa. A merchant belonging to «Murders» who had infiltrated the Academy Town several months earlier to sell Cursed Seal Armaments to students. Condemned with a death sentence, she finally managed to avoid death thanks to the «Dusk Witch»'s help. However, having committed atrocious crimes, she was probably never going to see the light of day again.

"I was too foolish. To think I could get away with doing such things right under the witch's nose—"

Thinking over these things, she could not help but clench her fist hard, producing creaking noises.

"...Hmph, stop making me laugh."

The youth switched to a one-armed handstand.

"...I will surely escape from here."

The grinning youth's left arm was hanging loosely. Although the wounds had healed, it was impossible to swing a sword properly without trouble.

"—Then I'll kill that guy."

Visible under the faint lighting was a face branded with seals.

Jio Inzagi. The former «Instructional School» assassin who was imprisoned by the Empire after his defeat at Kamito's hands in the battle at the Academy Town's abandoned mine. With one arm amputated and the power of the Cursed Seal Armaments lost, only the flames of hatred still burned violently, flashing in his eyes.

"—I'll kill him, kill him, kill him, kill him!"

While standing upside down, he repeated those words nonstop like a curse. But he could not even remember at all what the target of his vengeance looked like.

"Damn that accursed darkness spirit. I can't believe she wiped my memory—"

All memories related to that boy had vanished completely.

While he was being handed to the Imperial Knights, she had cast a spell on him.

To prevent Jio from seeking revenge? Or to avoid trouble arising if Jio told the Imperial Knights about that boy—

"I'll definitely find you, the guy who took away my left hand..."

"...Futile. No one can escape from this prison!"

"Hmph, how will you know if you don't try it!?"

Jio jumped down from his bed and threw a punch at the cell's bars.

"Oahhhhhhhh.... That really hurts!"

The sound of finger bones breaking seemed to have sounded. The bars had been strengthened using spirit magic, not something an «Instructional School»'s assassins could break barehanded.

"...Oh my, watching your stupidity makes me want to cry."

"...Shut the fuck up!"

Spitting, he turned to the other side.

"Hey, what about you? I've heard that you're quite something."

"..."

But there was only silence in the depths of the single cell shrouded in darkness.

"...Tsk. Every single one of you is so pathetic..."

Jio Inzagi lay down in annoyance. Just at this time—

Suddenly, there was violent shaking, causing even the deepest level of the prison to shake.

"...W-What's happening!? Is it because of my punch just now?"

Jio Inzagi yelled. Just at that moment—!

Crash—

Accompanied by a deafening sound, the cell's ceiling crashed down.

"...Wha!?"

Jio stared wide-eyed, unable to speak.

A collapsed ceiling. Billowing dust in the air. On a small pile of debris, a giant monster appeared.

A frighteningly massive body, stout legs as thick as prison pillars, blood-red compound eyes flashing in the dark—An impossibly large spider.

"...A militarized spirit!? Why in this place—"

"An enemy!" "I-Impossible..." "How could this place be attacked—uwahhhhhhhh!"

The soldiers guarding the prison screamed pitifully one after another. For the central region of the imperial capital to be attacked, it was totally unthinkable.

"Haha, kick them all away—«Ungoliant»!"

A girl's adorable voice resounded in the underground darkness. The giant spider spirit waved its eight legs, sending the surrounding walls and soldiers flying like cut grass, creating a total mess.

"...! That girl..."

Jio remembered the appearance of this petite girl.

Gray hair tied as twintails on the sides of her head. Blue eyes as clear as ice.

"You, aren't you the «Instructional School»'s number two—Muir Alenstar!?"

"...Hmm?"

Sitting on the spider's head, the girl looked back, narrowing her eyes at Jio.

"...Are you Jio Inzagi? What the heck are you doing here?"

"...This kind of thing should be totally obvious. I was caught by those damned knights! By the way, why are you even here? You're not here to save me, right?"

"...Huh?"

Muir Alenstarl was totally speechless.

"Why would Muir save a small fry like you?"

"Wha... small fry?"

Jio angrily hammered the iron bars but of course, the bars remained unmoving.

"Hey, get me out right now, «Monster»!"

The instant he yelled at Muir—

The giant spider's front leg descended before Jio's eyes.

The ground was split into two. Jio's forehead broke out in cold sweat.

"Don't call Muir with that name, or else you'll suffer the same fate as these destroyed cells."

"—Muir, ignore that guy. Continue destroying."

Amidst the screaming and shouting, another girl jumped down from the spider.

"Once the «Numbers» arrive, it'll be troublesome."

"Hmph, Muir got it, Lily—"

The spider-shaped militarized spirit spewed out a great amount of silk, wiping out the soldiers guarding the prison. Having gotten off the spider, Lily walked past Jio's cell, coming in front of Vivan's.

"Hey hey. Stop ignoring me, bitch!"

"Shut up, fake Demon King. Scum like you are completely worthless—"

A spirit crystal's light shone on Vivian who was sitting in a corner of the cell.

"—«Murders» merchant, Vivian Melosa."

"..."

"You should feel honored. The Cardinal holds expectations for your power."

"...Give me a break. Just let me continue to stay here."

Sitting there, Vivian Melosa answered emptily. Apparently, her fear of the «Dusk Witch» had completely crushed her mind.

"You don't want to regain your freedom?"

Saying that—

"If you wish to stay here like this, be my guest. I have no intention of forcing you—"

The sound of hard military boots were coming from the depths of the darkness.

Slowly appearing was a woman wearing a red mask, dressed in the Theocracy's military uniform.

Vivian held her breath. Jio was also stunned by her powerful presence.

Ignoring those two, the woman walked over to the farthest cell.

To confront inmate who had remained silent all this time, completely unfazed by the situation at hand.

"Hey, you bitch! Don't ignore me—"

Regaining his senses, Jio yelled at the woman.

"...What now?"

"You need power, right? Then take me. I am the «Instructional School»'s only successor of the «Demon King»—"

"Successor of the «Demon King», you say?"

Cardinal stopped walking and looked back.

"...Yeah. I am the man nearest to that Demon King—Solomon."

Jio grinned as he spoke.

Behind the mask, those crimson eyes shone with sharp light.

"Amusing. Then allow me to try using that power."

She pointed her finger towards Jio's cell. Generated from her fingertips, the flames instantly melted the iron bars that were protected by spirit magic.

"Hmph, show your gratitude to the Cardinal's magnanimity, Jio Inzagi."

Lily glanced sideways at Jio.

Having obtained his freedom, Jio swiftly ran out of his cell, but—

"...Gratitude? Hoh, how unfortunate for you, kind-hearted lady!"

With that, he escaped into the depths of the darkness...

"Jio Inzagi, you bastard!"

"Ignore him. Just let an insignificant character like him go."

Leaving the furious Lily, Cardinal turned to that cell.

She was standing before the cell. The presence inside seemed to waver slightly.

"What business do you have with me? Fake Ren Ashbell."

"Ah, you discerned it?"

She seemed a little surprised.

"I happen to know the real one."

"I see. Come to think of it, you have fought her(him) before."

The flames at her fingertips illuminated the cell brightly.

Shining blonde hair. Clear blue eyes. An even more powerful will exuded from the deepest level of the prison.

"Then I shall be brief, glorious knight. I need your power."

"I am already shouldering sins. Do you believe I will do as you say?"

Looking at the inmate in the cell, the masked girl sighed.

"Atonement huh? However, the more you act like this the more I want you."

"...What are you talking about?"

Cardinal took off her mask to show the other party her true appearance.

"—I am saving this world."

Chapter 4 - Frost Town

Part 1

After setting off from the Academy this morning, a number of hours had passed. Riding galloping horses all the way along the streets, Kamito and Rinslet finally arrived at a place called «Frost Town». From here, the Kyria Mountain Range could be seen in the distance.

Reaching Rinslet's homeland required crossing the precipitous Kyria Mountain Range, towering before their eyes. Although its altitude was lower than Dracunia's Kelbresse Mountain Range, the Kyria Mountain Range was actually the most dangerous in the continent. In the vast coniferous forests growing on the mountains, there lived many ferocious magic beasts.

Although there were mountain paths prepared, they were impossible to use under the current snowing conditions. Most of the merchants traveling back and forth between Laurenfrost and the imperial capital would take the long route around the mountain by going south.

(...Well, for us, that'd take too long.)

Riding on horseback, Kamito sighed, exhaling white mist.

If they took the long route around the mountain, it was anyone's guess when they were going to arrive at the «Forest of Ice Blossoms». In an attempt to get there as quickly as possible, crossing the Kyria Mountain Range directly was the only choice.

Besides, the sun was gradually setting in the west right now. After racing for a day, the horses were almost at their limits. Had he not received the «Wind's Protection» from Ellis before setting off, they probably would not have made it to this town today.

"But speaking of which, the change in scenery here is really quite dramatic—"

Reaching the town gates, Kamito could not help but exclaim with heartfelt emotion. The streets and town walls were all snow-white.

"After passing through these town gates, you have basically entered Laurenfrost territory."

Rinslet gracefully dismounted and showed the Laurenfrost family's crest to the guard—The emblem of a dire wolf. The guard instantly panicked and hastily ushered the two of them into town.

Leaving the horses at the stables at the town entrance, Kamito and Rinslet entered the town. The instant they stepped inside, the «Wind's Protection» applied on travelers was dispelled, causing the domain of wind surrounding the two of them to disappear. Once protected by a town, they were no longer considered travelers.

"Cold, it's so cold... I guess we'd better hurry and find a place to stay."

"Then how about we head over there to have some hot food first?"

Rinslet's finger was pointing at a tavern where the sign "The Sunny Fox Inn" was hanging.

Part 2

Ignoring the other customers in the tavern, Rinslet walked straight up to the bar.

Her long, dazzling platinum blonde hair was attracting every pair of eyes in the tavern.

(...Oh well, it's an expected sight.)

Kamito felt slightly helpless inside. Although that was not to say that the tavern customers were ill-behaved, in terms of common sense, this was really not an establishment that highborn ladies would ordinarily visit.

But Rinslet did not mind at all, walking directly to the counter.

"A glass of hot wine please, the best you have."

"N-Noble lady... The best we have is only a ten-year-old vintage from Arber..."

"No problem. Also, bring some simple food."

"Umm, I'll have the same—"

Kamito sat down next to Rinslet.

"Say, Rinslet, you actually drink?"

Alcoholic beverages were essentially banned at Areishia Spirit Academy, with only exceptions for when princess maidens made offerings of kagura dance.

"Inhabitants of Laurenfrost frequently drink hot wine to stay warm. A small sip is enough to warm your entire body... So, how about you, Kamito-san?"

"In my case, I can only drink a little."

Kamito answered ambiguously. He was actually not that bad at holding his alcohol, but it was just that during his former days working under Greyworth, being forced to be her drinking partner every night had left him with substantial mental trauma, thus preventing him from enjoying drinking in an active sense anymore. That was the actual truth.

Two glasses were placed on the counter, filled with hot wine. A sweet fragrance of raw ginger and citrous fruit wafted over. Taking a light sip, Kamito instantly felt a scorching sensation down his throat.

"...This wine really works a great effect."

He could feel a warm flow spreading gradually in his body.

"Yes, this is an indispensable drink for Laurenfrost winters."

Elegantly savoring the fine wine, Rinslet went slightly red in the cheeks. Under the dim lighting, this sight was almost making Kamito lose control.

(...W-What's with this crazy pounding in my heart?)

Kamito frantically took his eyes off the girl's profile.

"Oh right, there are a few things I would like to ask about—"

Rinslet put down her wineglass and spoke up.

Not to Kamito but towards the barkeep standing inside the bar.

"Has this great snowstorm persisted all this time?"

(...I see.)

Kamito realized the purpose of Rinslet choosing to sit at the counter. Before entering the Kyria Mountain Range, they should at least gather some useful information from locals.

"Yes, noble lady. Although not every single day, the weather has been like this for the past two weeks. After the Empire's representative team won the «Blade Dance», we were originally hoping for the climate here to become milder..."

Hearing the barkeep's laments, Kamito suddenly had a thought occurring to him.

(...Oh well, it should be fine.)

The «Blade Dance» spectators were mostly nobles from various nations on the continent. «Team Scarlet»'s name aside, ordinary people probably would not know Kamito and his teammate's faces.

"Ever since the snowstorm began, has anyone entered the Kyria Mountain Range?"

This was Kamito's question.

"That's impossible. Trying to cross that mountain range would be suicide. Also—"

The barkeep lowered his voice all of a sudden.

"It's not just because of the snowstorm. Rumor has it that monsters are appearing."

"...Monsters?"

Kamito and Rinslet exchanged glances.

"Recently, people have spotted «Ice Dragons» flying in the air near the mountain range. Rumors are all over town by now."

"Ice dragons?"

"The ice dragons of Laurenfrost have already gone extinct. Could there be a mistake?"

Rinslet was skeptical.

The Ordesia Empire was home to powerful dragons, but that was on the eastern side bordering Dracunia. They were not supposed to fly all the way to a place like Laurenfrost.

"Indeed. That's why there are also many townsfolk saying these might be warning signs of «Zirnitra»'s revival. Because the «Ice Dragons» are the minions of this guardian spirit."

"I have no interest in such ridiculous rumors."

Rinslet was a bit disappointed.

"These are just rumors after all, noble lady. I don't know what's the actual situation. The only thing I'm sure of is that entering the mountains now would be suicide."

The barkeep shook his head.

(...Monster in the snow mountains, huh.)

Leaving the two to their conversation, Kamito fell into deep thought.

Dragons were indeed a powerful race but to Kamito right now, they were nothing more than fodder. In fact, Kamito had already defeated monsters and spirits more powerful than dragons on numerous occasions.

(...But on mountains where it's difficult to walk in the snow...)

If they were attacked on a cliff, fighting while protecting Rinslet—

"Anyway, it would be best to rest in this town for now first."

"...Yeah. Let's set off after dawn."

Climbing snow-covered mountains in the night would be quite unwise. Furthermore, their bodies were currently quite exhausted as well.

Dinner provided by the tavern consisted of turnip lentil soup, black bread and salted salmon sauteed with dried fruit.

The taste was not bad despite being simple food. For Kamito's empty stomach, there was no food better than this.

While drinking hot wine, the two of them enjoyed dinner with great satisfaction.

The problem was what came after...

"...No other vacant rooms?"

"Yeah. Because of the great snow, many travelers are unable to proceed and are staying at this «Frost Town»."

The innkeeper shook his head very apologetically.

...The only room left was a single room.

Also, it was a room used for storage because it was normally unoccupied.

That kind of room was probably beyond what the sheltered Rinslet could tolerate.

"...No helping it, let's go check out other places."

"I think other places should be full too. I've heard that many people are sleeping in stables."

"Stables... Aren't they afraid of getting frozen to death?"

"Still tons better than sleeping in the streets, right? How about it? I'll give you a discount for the room."

Kamito turned to Rinslet.

Blushing red, Rinslet was murmuring something inaudible.

"...~s-squeezed in a room together, th-that kind of thing..."

"...Hey Rinslet—"

"Y-Yes!"

Rinslet made a strange sound.

"The ruler of this town should be a Laurenfrost retainer, right? If you announce your status, Rinslet, you should be able to get us accommodations for a night."

Kamito made a very practical suggestion, but—

"That is possible indeed, however..."

Rinslet hesitated and shook her head.

"Although I am a noble, I have never relied on my status to do anything."

"...Oh, I see."

...True. As a noble young lady more sheltered than the average person, her pride was definitely not going to let her ask others for favors by relying on her family's status.

As though prepared with resolve, Rinslet stared straight at the innkeeper.

"No problem. Take us to that room."

"...Rinslet?"

"N-No problem. Even if it means sharing a room with you, Kamito-san, I don't mind at all. Haven't you been sleeping in Claire's room all this time, Kamito-san?"

"That's true but still..."

"O-Or you mean... you dislike sharing a room with me?"

Rinslet pouted her cherry lips, slightly sulking.

Her clear eyes of emerald were staring up at Kamito.

"...F-Fine, I get it."

Kamito surrendered. Since she already said she did not mind, if he still refused, he would be the one who was being boorish.

"Then let's book the room. Please take us there."

"Okay, please come to the second floor."

Led by «The Sunny Fox Inn»'s innkeeper, the two of them mounted the creaking staircase.

The only remaining room was definitely an utter mess of stored objects.

The innkeeper lit a lamp. Looking around, Kamito and Rinslet were shocked speechless.

"This is... even more... than expected..."

"More cramped..."

Indeed, even as a single room this was way too cramped. Just as they could see, there was only one bed while the table and chairs all had

random articles piled on top of them. The bed was also covered in gray dust. Clearly the place had not been cleaned for many days.

"Sorry that all we have is a room of this standard. Please use it as you wish."

Rinslet stepped into the room in trepidation.

Creaking sounds, dust flying all over the air—

"A place to bathe... Looks like there's none."

"Only the school's dorms would have bathing facilities installed in every room."

Kamito shrugged. Several months earlier, during his days of searching for Restia, Kamito had frequently lived in rooms like these.

"...Is this place really okay?"

"O-Of course. A Laurenfrost wolf never goes back on her word."

Rinslet nodded with determination then started to swiftly clear away the dust in the room using a broom with a broken shaft.

...In merely moments, the room was already cleaned up to a decent state.

"Wow! Should I say this is surprising or something? I never knew you were this good!"

"Hmph, so long as I'm serious, this is nothing at all."

Hmph hmph~ Rinslet puffed her chest out with pride.

The bed was wiped clean and tidy, the messy trash was all dealt with. Witnessing skills that would even put a professional maid to shame, Kamito could not help but stare in amazement.

"Okay, let us get some rest early for tomorrow. P-Please hurry over."

Readying the sheets, Rinslet looked back at Kamito.

"Uh, umm..."

Kamito frantically shook his head. Although the room was already cleaned, the fact of one bed had not changed. Hence, Kamito had no intention of sleeping there, but—

"You can't guarantee sufficient restoration of energy unless you sleep properly on a bed."

"But two people sleeping in one bed is really a bit..."

"In that case, I shall sleep using Fenrir as a mattress."

"...Okay okay, I get it! I'll sleep on the bed, so please don't do that!"

Since she said it already, Kamito had no choice but to obey. But if the fact of his sleeping with Rinslet ever got out, he would certainly be exterminated by the Laurenfrost retainers, right?

(...Or perhaps, I'm just overthinking things?)

Shrugging helplessly, Kamito walked over to the bed.

However, Rinslet gripped the sheets without moving.

"Excuse me, Kamito-san?"

"Huh?"

"I can't change while you're here, Kamito-san!"

"Oh, sorry!"

Kamito frantically left the room.

Then after waiting at the door for a while—

"Kyah! What's with this nightgown!?"

A small scream was heard from inside the room.

"Rinslet?"

"No, nothing. Umm... You may come in now."

"Oh, okay..."

She had apparently finished changing. Kamito took a deep breath and opened the door.

(...!)

But he gasped, his brain going blank.

Rinslet's pajamas was—

An extremely sheer nightgown of lace, exquisitely embroidered.

(H-Her panties are totally visible...)

Through the nightgown's thin fabric, the style of her panties was completely clear to see.

Rinslet frantically held a blanket in front of her chest.

"D-Don't get the wrong idea! This must be Carol's fault... I have never ever worn such a shameless nightgown..."

Rinslet's voice grew smaller and smaller.

...It looked like Carol had made another airheaded blunder again.

"I-I see..."

Kamito gulped and slowly walked into the room under the incomparably tense atmosphere.

The bedside lighting shone on her face that was scorching from embarrassment.

Kamito slowly approached. Rinslet was so embarrassed that she buried her head in the blanket.

"...Umm, is this really okay? Sleeping together..."

"A noble never goes back on her word!"

Rinslet turned away.

While she had turned away, Kamito swiftly took off his uniform and changed into his pajamas. Suppressing the wavering in his heart, he squeezed into the sheets.

The crude bed was cold and hard, nothing like the ones at the Academy at all.

"So, won't just one blanket be cold?"

Lying down with their backs against each other, Kamito extinguished the light at the bedside.

"We can't squander the fire spirit crystals carelessly."

Rinslet whispered lightly by his ear.

"Also, the Kyria Mountain Range is much colder than this."

"You're right..."

Under the blanket, Kamito was shivering from cold.

In the darkness, the rustling sound of friction between clothing could be heard—

Boing~♪

Using both arms, Rinslet hugged Kamito from behind.

"R-Rinslet!? What are you—"

"L-Like this, it'll be slightly warmer."

Rinslet buried her face into Kamito's back and said softly.

"True, this will be better for warmth, but..."

Embraced by her arms, Kamito was unable to move at all.

Fine hair rubbed against the back of his neck... So tickling...

(...This situation is bad!)

Wanting to change his sleeping posture, Kamito turned slightly.

Boing~♪

"Ah... Mmm... ♪"

"...!"

"K-Kamito-san... Please don't move suddenly, mmm..."

"...Hmm?"

Boing, boing♪

"...Ah, mmmmm..."

Kamito moved again, causing weird noises to be heard.

"Mmm... H-Hah... Serious, Kamito-san, you're so bad."

Wanting to shift his sleeping posture, Kamito felt that something had gotten caught on his clothing.

(In that case, I'll have to use that move...)

Kamito closed his eyes—

Relaxing his entire body, making his mind as still as water.

"...Kamito-san?"

"Zzz... Zzz..."

...Poke, poke.

"Zzz..."

No reaction even when poked in the cheek. «The Act of Mental Oblivion»—Trained as part of an assassin's skill set, it was not something anyone could do.

"...Seriously, he's asleep already."

Rinslet remarked a bit disappointed.

"...Then I shall sleep too."

Relaxing her arms slightly, Rinslet gradually drifted off into her dreams.

(...That's falling asleep way too easily!)

Claire was also the type to fall asleep easily. Probably all noble young ladies were like this?

And also due to exhaustion. No matter what, they had to hurry on their journey early the next morning.

In any case, Kamito breathed a sigh of relief. Slightly, he moved his body under the blanket.

They still needed to hasten their expedition tomorrow, aiming to cross the mountain range ravaged by cold winds and heavy snow before sundown.

Closing his eyes, Kamito slept for real this time.

Part 4

"...Soon, I'll be able to see... Judia."

Probably in the middle of a dream, these words slipped out of her mouth.

(...Judia?)

Kamito was shocked.

Judia Laurenfrost. She was Rinslet's younger sister who had failed in a kagura dance offering to the elemental lords and was sealed into eternal cursed ice several years ago.

Rinslet's reason for entering the «Blade Dance» was to save her. But in the end, this wish could not be realized. Until Iseria Seaward retrieved her full power, breaking the cursed ice was impossible.

Despite her haughty airs at school, her thoughts were always with her younger sister that was sealed in ice.

"I must... save you..."

"...Rinslet."

Kamito gripped Rinslet's hand tightly.

Part 5

The next morning, Kamito woke before the sun had completely risen.

"Gah... So cold... This place is freezing!"

Flipping the blanket open, he drew in a breath of the icy air.

While Kamito was stretching, a familiar sound was heard from the bed.

Lying next to Kamito, dressed in a nightgown, Rinslet was still asleep. Her face was showing a vulnerable and unguarded expression that was almost impossible to see normally.

Accidentally recalling what happened last night, Kamito felt his face heat up.

In order not to rouse her, Kamito gently got off the bed and opened a small window in the corner of the room.

Although the storm had stopped blowing, snow continued to fall. The accumulated snow on the roadside was being melted by a flame spirit that someone had summoned. Although summoning spirits on the roadside without permission was forbidden by the Empire, it could not be helped under such conditions.

(...But there still seems to be a storm over on that side.)

Kamito looked out to the mountains in the distance.

The mountain range had thick clouds gathered over it. It was impossible to see peaks from his location.

"...Although the innkeeper guy mentioned the appearance of monsters..."

"Kamito, you already got up?"

"...Hmm?"

Kamito looked back at the voice in the room.



Standing there was the snow fairy.

"...E-Est, what's with that getup?"

Kamito could not help but widen his eyes.

Est was dressed in a bulky winter jacket with thick gloves on her hands and a fluffy cylindrical fur hat. Extremely cute.

"This is standard winter gear for locals. I conjured it by using pedestrians on the street for reference."

Est answered while spinning expressionlessly.

Her long, shiny, silver-white hair was as dazzling as snow under sunlight.

"Kamito, what do you think?"

"O-Oh. It's very cute."

Kamito expressed his honest feelings.

(...Spirits aren't supposed to feel cold, right?)

Kamito remarked in his heart. Oh well, whatever, it's cute anyway.

As he said that, Est spun again—

"How is it?"

"Yeah! It's very cute!"

"I'm so glad, Kamito."

Est spun on her own again and again.

...Spinning, spinning.

...Spinning, spinning.

"Uwah, Kamito. My eyes are starting to spin—"

"Hey, are you alright!?"

"...You two, what exactly are you doing?"

Waking up, Rinslet tilted her head in puzzlement.

Part 6

Just as Kamito's group was about to set off towards the Kyria Mountain Range—

Claire had returned to the Academy from Elstein lands.

"...If it's Kamito, he should be fine without me by his side, right?"

Humming a song in a good mood, Claire walked towards the classroom of Raven Class.

She was carrying a box which contained a famous Elstein specialty, hot spring steamed buns.

"If I'm not here, he must be very lonely... He might even be up to playing pranks."

In any case, after spending happy times with her family, Claire was currently in a very delightful mood.

"Next time, I should take Kamito on a trip to the Elstein hot springs. Because Kamito cooks for me all the time—This counts as a reward for all the help he gives me regularly."

Claire stopped in front of Raven Class's window.

Adjusting her twintails with her hands, she then checked her attire.

(...What am I getting high-strung about?)

Suddenly feeling nervous for some reason, Claire's cheeks turned bright red.

(I-It's just been a few days I haven't seen him...)

Clearing her throat, Claire stepped forward again.

(Fianna has gone to the All Nations Conference, so the room is left to j-just the two of us...)

On the way to the student dormitories, Claire felt inexplicably nervous, her heart pounding nonstop.

Finally reaching the dormitory door, she took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Kamito, I'm back... Oh?"

Still holding the door handle, Claire cocked her head in puzzlement.

...There was no one in the room.

"...Hmm? Kamito?"

She searched all over the room once, but did not find anything.

"...Hmph, what's this...? So my nervousness went to waste."

Claire threw her souvenirs onto the table and threw herself onto Kamito's bed, playing with her hair.

"What is the meaning of this, Kamito that jerk..."

...Thump, thump, thump.

Taking her anger out on the pillow, Claire then buried her face into it.

Hugging the pillow in this manner—

Recently, she seemed to have acquired this kind of habit... Just by hugging his pillow like this, her feelings would calm down.

(Going out to shop or whatever's fine, just come back soon, you great big jerk...)

...Burying her face in pillow, she took a deep breath.

"..., ...Kami... to..."

...What to do? After mere days of separation, to think she would feel this lonely.

She wanted to hear his voice as quickly as possible. She wanted him to stroke her head gently.

"...Ohh... Hurry—and—come back..."

...Rolling, rolling, rolling.

Hugging the pillow like that, Claire rolled and rolled on the bed.

Suddenly, she fell off the bed with a thud—



"...Hmm?"

Something seemed to have fallen off the bed... Something like a note.

"...What's this?"

Claire climbed back up and picked up the note on the floor.

"...Hmm... 'Going out on a long journey for now. If you need dinner, just eat outside...'"

Her hands trembled from anger while her crimson hair stood on end like flames.

"What on earth is the meaning of this——!"

The note was incinerated into ash in Claire's hand.

...An hour later.

The oppressive atmosphere was finally conquered by Scarlet's fuzzy tail's tickling attack.

Part 7

Academy Town. In a sickroom at Saint Seraelle Hospital...

"Miss Ellis Fahrengart, you may leave the hospital today. Congratulations."

The princess maiden healer came to inform Ellis of this news.

"But speaking of which, I was really surprised. Although elementalists have much stronger recovery abilities than ordinary people, I never expected you to be fully healed so soon——"

"...Yes, I surprised myself as well."

Ellis nodded with a solemn expression.

She originally thought she was several days away from being discharged from the hospital.

"Do you have any idea regarding the reason?"

The healer in charge of Ellis asked incredulously.

A contract with a holy spirit or water spirit would be slightly understandable, but Ellis was contracted to a wind spirit, which could not possibly confer such massive recovery ability.

"Hmm, well, even if you ask, I have no idea either..."

Ellis avoided eye contact with the healer.

"...Hmm, really?"

"O-Of course!"

Ellis answered guiltily under the healer's skeptical gaze.

...Of course, she did not have no idea at all.

Ellis had started recovering rapidly during this time yesterday.

(...At the time, I felt some kind of invisible power flowing into my body, that was the feeling.)

Ellis touched her lips lightly with her hand, her face instantly growing hot.

(...I cannot believe I did something so shameless!)

As the Captain of the Knights, Ellis was supposed to serve as the students' role model, upholding public morals by example. However—

The sensation of lips was so concrete. In the depths of her mind, she recalled the feeling that was numbingly sweet.

"Miss Ellis, what's with you?"

"Nothing is wrong!"

Face bright red, Ellis shook her head forcefully.

Already out of the hospital, Ellis made her way to the school building to find out about resuming the Knights' work.

(...Even so, it really is quite unbelievable.)

Along the main street in town, Ellis thought while walking.

(Could it be that Kamito's power flowed in reverse to my body? That kind of thing should not happen—)

For example, when Fianna applied healing magic to Kamito through direct contact, she never said anything about power flowing in reverse.

(...L-Looks like I must test it out again.)

I must test it out again thoroughly—Ellis made the decision on her own accord.

—Just at that moment, there was a commotion on the side of the road.

"...Hmm, what is happening?"

Rapidly switching back to serious knight mode, Ellis looked over there.

In the plaza direction, flames were currently burning intensely.

...No ordinary fire, this was the work of spirits.

"Summoning spirits in the Academy Town is against the rules...!"

Ellis frantically hurried over to the commotion.

But just as she arrived, over there was—

"Wha... Claire!?"

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble...!

A girl carrying a large amount of luggage on her back. It was Claire.

Enveloped in flames, her red twintails were billowing in the wind.

Depending on a spirit's attributes, various effects could manifest on the elementalists' body.

Claire was apparently the true source of the flames seen from afar.

"C-Claire, what exactly is going on?"

Hearing Ellis's voice, Claire looked at her.

"Not here, not there, not anywhere!"

Intimidated by her forcefulness, Ellis halted in her tracks.

...She looked extremely angry.

"Kamito, Kamito, he abandoned me all alone... S-Sob sob~..."

Claire bursted into tears, her intimidating twintails also fell back down.

"...W-Wait. I totally fail to understand what you are talking about. First tell me the whole story."

"O-Okay... Sob..."

—Claire told everything from the start, leading to the commotion at the plaza.

"...What? Going with Rinslet, just the two of them!?"

Yesterday when visiting Ellis, Kamito had definitely said he was going to Laurenfrost.

However—

"J-Just the two of them going... I never heard about that!"

Ellis yelled angrily. This was a major incident!

Because speaking of two people on a trip—

(...That means spending nights outside together!)

Just imagining it slightly made Ellis's face go bright red.

...No good, I must believe in Kamito. Even though it was just the two of them traveling together, Kamito was surely not going to do something dastardly, right? But trips offered excellent opportunities for improving male-female relationships. In that case, it would not be surprising if anything happened.

Also, Claire looked like she was not going to give up until she chased down Kamito.

"...I-I am going too!"

Ellis declared.

"...Eh?"

Eyes red and swollen from crying, Claire tilted her head in puzzlement after hearing Ellis.

"...It's fine if you don't come along. Also, you have the Knights' work, right?"

"How could I ignore something as shameless as a boy and a girl traveling alone together? Correcting these morally deficient practices is precisely part of the Knights' work!"

"Th-That's just making excuses, right? You don't have to go out of your way to come along."

"Hmm, are you really sure this is fine?"

"...What do you mean?"

Ellis raised an index finger and explained.

"Listen carefully. The two of them set off from the Academy yesterday during the daytime. If you start chasing now, it is quite unrealistic in terms of time."

"True, you have a point, but..."

"However, with the assistance of a demon wind spirit with flying and tracking abilities, chasing them down in one or two days is not impossible."

"Guh..."

Claire could not find any reason to object.

...Just as Ellis pointed out, without a demon wind spirit's assistance, there was no way to catch up to Kamito and Rinslet.

"How now? Have you made your decision?"

"Uh~huh."

—So that was that.

In the end, the situation became Claire and Ellis chasing after Kamito together.

Part 8

"Luminaris-sama, that tree looks familiar—"

"...We circled back here again? What on earth is going on?"

—In the depths of the «Forest of Ice Blossoms». Covered by thick snow, the forest was shrouded in dense fog. The Holy Kingdom's knights had already gone in circles for dozens of hours.

In the forest's center, the surrounding fog was getting denser and denser. Spirits that looked just like trees were using skillful changes of their appearances to deceive the intruders' eyes.

It was like the entire forest was refusing their entry.

(...By the way, why did it become like this?)

Luminaris could not help but show a bitter expression on her dignified face.

Despite being the cream-of-the-crop from the «Sacred Spirit Knights» with their outstanding martial ability, perhaps they might even get wiped out by the enemy if they kept circling aimlessly in the snow-covered forest like this. But on the other hand, the surrounding fog's increasing density was indicating that they were getting closer and closer to their destination.

This dense fog was definitely no natural phenomena—A magic «Barrier».

Not the darkness spirit's doing. Back when the old couple from the village discovered her, she was incapable of walking, not even able to speak. In her current state, making this kind of barrier was impossible.

(...No mistake, this «Barrier» must belong to the Elfim race.)

A «Barrier» capable of covering the entire forest was definitely impossible to deploy by one person's efforts alone. Very likely, this was erected using ancient ruins as a foundation.

Also, with great certainty, the darkness spirit was with the Elfim race.

(...So, we shall not falter here.)

Luminaris issued orders to her subordinates.

"Starting now, we will split into two teams to act separately. If you find any ancient stone monuments or old trees in the forest, destroy them directly. They are very likely to be the barrier's foundations."

"...!"

The four subordinates looked at one another.

"But doesn't that go against the treaty—"

Even during war time, destroying ancient ruins was forbidden. This was part of the terms that the nations had already decided between themselves. However, Luminaris was issuing an order to destroy ruins.

"Just act according to my orders, for I will take responsibility. Otherwise, we will die in this land of snow at this rate."

Faced with Luminaris's irrefutable command, the Holy Kingdom's knights nodded with determination.

Chapter 5 - Monsters of the Kyria Mountain Range

Part 1

After setting off from «Frost Town», several hours had passed.

Reaching halfway up the mountain happened even later.

It was currently noon but the sky was blotted by thick layers of clouds, making it totally impossible to see the sun.

The blizzard was blowing harder and harder. Mixed with frost and snow, the raging winds howled while they rampaged.

The view was just a wide expanse of white.

"...It's almost impossible to see ahead!"

Inside the blizzard, Kamito yelled towards Rinslet.

As soon as he opened his mouth, a strong gust of cold air went straight into his lungs.

"You must keep Fenrir's tail firmly in your sights!"

Rinslet's voice could be heard from somewhere.

She was supposed to be advancing while riding Fenrir's back, but given the pure-white view, Kamito could not even tell which direction was which.

Relying on Rinslet's voice, Kamito tried hard to find the figure of Fenrir the vanguard.

More precisely, he was looking for the light from the spirit crystal tied to Fenrir's tail.

The faint light swaying in the blizzard was the only beacon to guide Kamito's direction of advance.

Finally finding that faint light ahead in his view, Kamito adjusted his direction slightly.

To prevent sinking into the deep snow, Kamito focused divine power into his legs, staying in a state akin to floating. This was a technique for moving over snow terrain and required extensive training to master.

(...This turns out to be more exhausting than imagined.)

The Academy's uniform was already woven with magic for resisting cold, but even together with extra winter clothing, this extreme cold was still unbearable. Entering these snow-covered mountains without sufficient preparation would undoubtedly lead to getting frozen to death.

Of the prepared fire spirit crystals, two were already about to become spent. Once exhausted of power, fire spirits would return to «Astral Zero», turning spirit crystals into something indistinguishable from transparent stones.

Although Kamito was struck with an impulse to simply release the «Demon Slayer»'s power to blow apart the blizzard, actually doing so would probably cause a massive avalanche.

Kamito quickened his pace and finally caught up to Fenrir ahead.

"...H-Huff... Although I prepared myself mentally... Nothing less expected of the Kyria Mountain Range."

Almost out of breath, Kamito stabbed the «Demon Slayer» into the snow.

"From now on, the road will get even tougher."

Riding Fenrir, Rinslet looked back and said.

"Say, it's about time for a break, right..."

"No, you must break past this place before the blizzard exhausts your stamina."

"I guess you're right..."

Looking around, Kamito saw that there was no place at all to stop and rest.

Taking out a water bottle, Kamito took a sip of black tea which had plenty of sugar and raw ginger added, warming up his chest instantly.

There was also a tiny piece of fire spirit crystal inside the flask to prevent the tea from freezing over.

"I remember there's a cottage built for hikers up ahead. There is a stove inside there, so we could warm up some milk and make some pancakes."

"Then I'm looking forward to it."

Rinslet's pancakes were probably his only hope in this freezing hell.

"But you see—"

Kamito looked up at the sky with its heavy layers of clouds.

"It really doesn't seem like an ordinary blizzard..."

"...Indeed. I have never seen it snow like this in all my years growing up."

Rinslet nodded.

Even if someone possessed a spirit with flight capabilities, it was probably impossible to fly under these conditions.

"Could it really be «Zirnitra»...?"

"...Zirnitra?"

Kamito asked with curiosity.

—Speaking of which, he seemed to have heard this name at the tavern yesterday as well.

"It's an ancient legend in the lands of Laurenfrost."

Rinslet explained.

"«Zirnitra» is the guardian spirit of Laurenfrost. A thousand years ago, during the Demon King War, spirits that were fighting under Demon King Solomon's banner were sealed into this Kyria Mountain Range, so the story goes."

"Uh... In the end, it's just a legend... Right?"

"Yes. However, no one knows for sure whether that kind of spirit actually exists for real."

Rinslet shrugged and took out a slightly larger spirit crystal.

"I shall release «Fire Magic's Protection». Please step back slightly."

"Yeah, got it."

"—O burning flame of protection, I beseech thee to grant us thy protection."

Pouring divine power into the spirit crystal, Rinslet recited an incantation of releasing.

Instantly, the spirit crystal released powerful heat, covering the surroundings with warm air.

An anti-snow barrier was deployed from the spirit crystal, finally freeing up visibility that had been invaded by the snow.

However, Kamito could not help but gasp at the scene before them—

A giant valley of two opposite walls of ice. The path running along the precipitous cliff suddenly became very narrow. A single misstep would mean falling directly to the bottom of the valley.

"...Are we taking this route? It's going to be a pain."

"There is actually a safer route, but if we followed that one, it would be impossible to traverse this mountain today."

"I see, then it really can't be helped..."

Kamito took a step forward. Fragments of ice underfoot rolled and fell to the valley's bottom.

"We should hurry, «Fire Magic's Protection» cannot persist for long."

If the spirit crystal's effect vanished halfway, survival would definitely be impossible.

With Fenrir heading the vanguard, the two of them followed cautiously after him.

Along the way, Kamito saw countless ice caves on the opposite cliff face.

"Those ice caves, are they naturally formed?"

"People say that those were the homes of «Frost Giants»."

"I see..."

The «Frost Giants» were a race that had come from «Astral Zero» to this continent and built a vast empire before the rise of mankind. Although they had already gone extinct several thousand years ago, the countless ice caves dug out from the walls of the cliff remained preserved and untouched, giving a somber feeling of history.

Just as Kamito's emotions stirred while he was looking at the ice caves...

He heard the sound of wings flapping overhead, sounding strong enough to tear the air apart.

Part 2

"—Wha!?"

He frantically looked up.

Ripping apart the dark-gray clouds, a giant winged silhouette was flying in approach.

"—That's an ice dragon!?"

Rinslet yelled.

Talons as sharp as blades. Ice-like scales covering the entire body. A breed of flying dragon.

A pair of crimson eyes flashed with blazing light, locking down on Kamito and Rinslet below.

"So it looks like the rumors of a monster are true!"

Gripping the «Demon Slayer» tightly, Kamito prepared for battle.

The ice dragon was not intimidated and descended rapidly from the air, posturing its massive talons for attack.

The attack powered by overwhelming weight was parried by Kamito's sword. The talons were shattered while the ice dragon smashed into a wall of ice with its original momentum. The ice wall shattered, producing scattering ice debris that blocked Kamito's view.

"Kamito-san, be careful of the ground!"

Hearing Rinslet's warning, Kamito hastily jumped backwards.

Immediately, the path along the cliff collapsed. The place he had been standing was instantly turned into shattered ice, rolling into the valley. Kamito broke out with cold sweat in fright.

(...Fighting here is way too risky!)

Among all dragons, ice dragons were only ranked in the middle. Under normal conditions, for Kamito who was able to solo high-level demonic dragons, ice dragons would not count as terrifying enemies.

But under such adverse terrain and weather, there was no way for him to bring out his original power.

After crashing into the ice wall, the ice dragon shook its giant body and flew into the sky again.

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- «Freezing Arrow»!"

Having released her elemental waffe, Rinslet swiftly fired arrows.

However, they were almost all dodged by the ice dragon circling in the blizzard.

"...It's totally impossible to aim properly in such a heavy blizzard!"

Meanwhile, the ice dragon was a breed of dragon blessed with the protection of ice. Even in this kind of weather, they were capable of flying freely without problems.

The ice dragon flew towards Rinslet while she was firing with her bow, opening its jaws lined with sharp teeth.

Its mouth began to glow—

Kamito jumped and stood in front of Rinslet to shield her—

"—Est, I'm counting on you!"

'—Yes, Kamito.'

The «Demon Slayer» released its full power.

At the same time, countless sword-like shards of ice were brought by the howling blizzard.

«Dragon's Breath»—One of the reasons why dragons were considered the most terrifying of all magic beasts.

"...! Ohhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The sacred blade released silver-white radiance. The flash of light erupting from the «Demon Slayer» melted and destroyed the countless ice blades blown by the rampaging wind.

"Kamito-san—"

"Rinslet, let's retreat back to the place we were just now. Otherwise, it's impossible to fight properly here."

"I understand—«Freezing Rain»!"

Rinslet nocked five arrows and fired them into the sky.

The arrows suddenly split apart in the air, turning into countless blades flying towards the ice dragon's scales. Since dragons possessed high magic resistance, this kind of attack was probably quite ineffective, but at least it was enough to halt the ice dragon for now.

While the ice dragon was hindered, the two of them swiftly returned along the path they had came.

They could still hear the sound of wings flapping behind them. Shaking off the ice adhering to its body, the ice dragon made an ear-splitting roar and flew high in the sky.

"The ice dragon is escaping!"

"No, that's not right—!"

Almost entirely through instinct, Kamito grabbed Rinslet's arm while she was running alongside him.

At the same time, there was the sound of something slicing through the air, enough to shake the atmosphere.

The ice dragon was making a rapid dive at the ice cliff above Kamito and Rinslet. The impact broke off a large chunk of the cliff and giant blocks of ice were rolling from above.

(Damn it—!)

Kamito forcefully pulled Rinslet's arm that he was holding and hit the ground while covering her. Then he immediately drew out the «Demon Slayer» to smash apart the falling blocks of ice.

Falling down one after another, the ice blocked their path completely.

"...Our retreat has been cut off entirely."

Dragons had the highest intelligence among all magic beast, even to the point that there existed some among high-level dragons that were capable of human speech.

This ice dragon was also very crafty.

Flying to the air once more, the ice dragon looked like it intended to continue breaking the ice cliff.

"...Go here!"

Pulling Rinslet's hand, he returned to the path they had been walking along. Finding his body unable to move freely at will, Kamito was greatly anxious, for his entire body's muscles had grown sluggish due to the air temperature together with the thick winter clothing that was difficult to move in. The accumulated fatigue instantly erupted all at once.

(...Also, this air here is so thin.)

Trying to get more oxygen was making him take large breaths through his mouth irregularly, causing his divine power to become unstable. Without highly concentrated divine power, the «Demon Slayer» would be nothing more than a blunt blade.

"Kamito-san, the «Fire Magic's Protection» is almost over!"

Rinselt yelled.

The fire spirit crystal's barrier effect shrunk greatly in area.

"At this rate, the situation will get worse and worse—"

Kamito suddenly halted and stared at the ice dragon circling in the air above.

"...Do you have a plan?"

"Even if only for an instant, can you find a way to suppress that thing?"

"Then what are you planning to do then?"

"Well, you'll see when the time comes."

Hearing Kamito's answer—

"—In that case, I shall try!"

The platinum blonde hair fluttered forcefully.

Rinslet nodded with a expression filled with confidence.

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce—«Freezing Arrow»!"

Readying her elemental waffe, the bow, she shot an arrow to the sky.

Rather than the ice dragon's body that possessed high magical resistance, the target was above its head—

Freezing the air over the ice dragon, she created a giant block of ice.

"O hammer that punishes the proudly strong—«Frost Fall»!"

A giant block of ice, twice the size of the ice dragon, fell straight down under the action of gravity.

Struck by the overwhelming weight, the ice dragon roared in pain.

"Now is the moment!"

"Yeah!"

Yelling, Kamito had already taken off his winter coat that had snow and ice all stuck to it.

Releasing his divine power completely, he kicked the ice wall and used the crumbling cliff to move straight up.

"Th-That is way too reckless!"

Rinslet screamed shrilly.

"Don't worry, I'm counting on you to cover me!"

Kicking the wall of ice, he rose to the cliff's pinnacle in one breath.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhh...!"

Raising the «Demon Slayer» up high, Kamito made a thrust at the ice dragon's back along with the ice.

The dragon's scales broke and scattered with a metallic sound.

(—How hard is this thing!?)

Kamito exclaimed with surprise in his heart. Dragon scales were the hardest material on the continent. In his current state, unable to control Est's power in a stable manner, it was very difficult for Kamito to pierce the ice dragon completely.

ROOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAR!

Howling angrily, the ice dragon flew up into the sky again, turning at high speed in the violent blizzard.

"Guh...!"

Kamito tightly gripped the sacred sword that was stabbed into the dragon's back.

A bottomless abyss lay below. Letting go would mean instant death.

(I'm counting on you, Rinslet—!)

Down at the cliff, Rinslet was currently chanting high-level spirit magic.

In the blizzard, Kamito could hear her clear voice resounding faintly.

"—I hereby summon thee, capable of defending against the breath of dragons and the arms of giants, the frozen shield—!"

—With that, the spirit magic was complete.

Countless giant walls of ice extended out from the silver-white shattered ground, one after another.

Kamito pulled out the «Demon Slayer» and jumped down from the dragon's back.

His entire body's muscles shuddering, Kamito curled up in the air, bracing himself for the impact.

In the next instant, Kamito fell down hard on the ground surface of ice.

«Ice Wall»—Defensive spirit magic originally used for defense had now prepared an excellent battlefield.

"Well done, Rinslet!"

"You really would have fallen directly to the bottom of the valley if this failed!"

Rinslet yelled angrily.

The wounded ice dragon's eyes shone red with wrath. Opening its jaws, it was about to release another dragon's breath.

But this was exactly the chance Kamito was waiting for.

"—Let's do it, Est!"

'—Yes, Kamito.'

Est's reply could be heard from the divine power enveloping his right hand.

"O steel wrapped in endless darkness, the «Demon's Sword»—Terminus Est Zwei!"

The instant he yelled, his right hand's spirit seal gave off dazzling light.

Carved on top of the sword emblem was Restia Ashdoll's emblem.

"O endless darkness, slaughter mine enemy—«Vorpall Blast»!"

Aiming at the dragon's giant glowing mouth, Kamito swung the steel sword that was dyed by the color of darkness.

Dark lightning erupted, piercing the ice dragon's throat.

"Dragon scales are what possesses high magical resistance but that kind of thing can't possibly be inside the dragon's body, right?"

Roaring with wrath, the ice dragon fell straight into the abyss of the valley.

"...Is it dead?"

Rinslet walked over.

"...No, dragons have extremely powerful vitality. Before that thing recovers—"

—Mid-sentence, Kamito swallowed the rest of his words.

Suddenly, the blizzard was even stronger than before—

A giant shadow covered them from above.

(...Another one!?)

Kamito jumped in fright. Also, this one was even bigger than the ice dragon from just now.

(No way...)

It was not that Kamito had been careless. Dragons tended to be highly territorial and chances for two dragons to appear simultaneously at the same place were very low.

(...But why are there six more ice dragons!)

Rumble—The six ice dragons landed on the ground neatly.

(...It's over—!)

Currently, Kamito and Rinslet were standing on a temporary foothold created by magic. Naturally, there was no way it could withstand such a great impact.

The ice underfoot cracked open and collapsed instant—!

"Kyah!"

"Rinslet, hold onto me tight!"

Saying that, Kamito reached out to catch Rinslet.

In that manner, together with the collapsing ice, they fell towards the bottomless darkness.

"...Damn it—!"

Kamito bent his body in midair and used the sword gripped tightly in his right hand to stab into the wall of ice.

Screech—Accompanied by violent scattering sparks, a trail was carved on the ice wall.

But this was not enough to halt their falling momentum. Falling straight towards the bottom of the valley in this manner—

"G-uh...!"

"Kamito-san!"

"...Don't... let go no matter what!"

Kamito pulled Rinslet with great force.

(—What am I going to do about the bottom?)

Their falling speed kept increasing. At this rate, it was impossible to stop.

(...My arm strength, is already... reaching a limit...)

"Kamito-san, hurry and look over there!"

Rinslet suddenly cried out.

Looking down, Kamito saw a place in the ice wall that could serve as a foothold.

(That's an ice cave of the «Frost Giants»!)

Seeing a ray of hope... A very faint ray of hope.

(...It's too far. But there's no choice but to try—)

If he failed to jump with the right timing, only death awaited them.

"Okay, hold on tight to me—"

"Y-Yes!"

Pouring his entire body's divine power into his right hand, Kamito released the «Demon Slayer»'s power.

The blade gave off a flash of dazzling light, shattering the ice wall.

"Ohhhhhhhhh!"

Kicking at the ice wall, Kamito jumped towards the ice cave. All that remained was falling under gravity and leaving things to fate.

(This must succeed!)

—Kamito closed his eyes.

Part 3

"...-san, Kamito-san!"

"...Gu, uh..."

Opening his eyes slightly, he saw Rinslet's face while she was desperately calling to him.

Confirming that Kamito was still conscious, Rinslet exhaled in relief.

"...Looks like, it seems to have succeeded."

Making a twisted expression from the pain attacking his entire body, Kamito whispered. Landing on his back in order to protect Rinslet, Kamito had virtually taken on all of the impact.

(...Due to a powerful impact hitting my spine, my entire body is in a state of paralysis. Also, my right arm is dislocated.)

Lying face up, Kamito calmly assessed his body's condition.

If he tried to stand up forcibly, it would probably hurt like hell.

Without getting up, Kamito surveyed his surroundings.

This was a giant cave that was carved out of the ice wall. The ceiling was very high while the depths was completely pitch dark.

"...Could it be that this ice cave leads to somewhere?"

"The imperial capital's «Spirit Investigation Association» investigated many times already. But because the internal structure is too complicated, ultimately none of the investigations bore fruit."

"...I guess trying to cross the mountain through here doesn't work after all, right?"

"Getting lost in a labyrinth of ice would be even worse."

Rinslet shrugged as she answered.

"In other words, we need to climb back up the ice wall huh... Gah..."

"Y-You can't get up yet!"

Just as Kamito tried struggling to get up, Rinslet frantically held him down.

"But if you don't cross before sundown..."

Once night fell, the air temperature would become even lower. Staying here like this, they were going to freeze to death sooner or later.

"In your current state, there's no way you can climb up the ice wall no matter what. Besides, there's such a heavy blizzard as well."

"Umm..."

Kamito was instantly at a loss for words, looking out at the raging blizzard outside. Besides, with those ice dragons out there, with that kind of creature present, climbing up the ice wall was absolutely impossible—

Suddenly, Rinslet's fingertips touched Kamito's right hand.

"...Rinslet?"

"Please don't speak. I will now enchant you with healing magic."

She was holding a «Healing» spirit crystal.

"O light of healing, I beseech thee to grant this person the power of life—"

After she recited a simple incantation, the spirit crystal gave off a gentle sacred light.

But still lying down, Kamito turned his head to look at Rinslet, pushing her hand away lightly.

"I'm very grateful for your kind intentions, but this sort of half-baked magic isn't going to work on my body. So Rinslet, you should use this spirit crystal on yourself."

The vast majority of healing magic belonged under the holy attribute. As an ice specialist, Rinslet was only able to use simple healing magic by borrowing a spirit crystal's power. To be honest, magic of this level was completely ineffective on Kamito whose body housed the Darkness Elemental Lord's power.

"I... have almost no injuries, you know?"

"Just now, when the ice broke, your foot was cut by the fragments, right?"

"Th-This level of minor injury is completely nothing compared to your condition, Kamito-san."

"It'll be a huge problem if scars were left behind on a girl. And look, I still have «Steel's Protection» from Est. This kind of small injury will heal on its own."

"...~G-Girl..."

Rinslet's face went bright red—

...As though making some kind of decision, she nodded forcefully.

"F-Feel honored, Kamito-san, since you have already said this much, then—"

"...Huh?"

Rustle rustle rustle... Fwip.

Suddenly, Rinslet took off her skirt.

"H-H-Hold on, what are you doing..."

"P-Please be quiet!"

Wearing only underwear on her lower body, Rinslet mounted Kamito.

Silken panties with delicate embroidery. Kamito could feel her soft thighs pressing against him.

"...!"

His entire body's blood flow sped up, instantly heating up his body.

"...I-I'll transmit this healing magic directly into your body, Kamito-san!"

Rinslet's face was bright red from embarrassment—

One by one, she unfastened the buttons on her uniform.

Clad in the pristine undergarment of pure white was a pair of voluptuous breasts.

Her snow-white skin was tinged slightly red. Long platinum blonde hair draping down, the sight of this body—

...Honestly, it was very pretty.

"...Rinslet."

Kamito was mesmerized by the sight instantly—

"S-Staring like that makes me very embarrassed..."

Rinslet pursed her lips tight.

"Please... close your eyes."

"Yeah, got it..."

Kamito hastily closed his eyes. He knew what Rinslet was about to do next. Indeed, transmitting healing magic through direct physical contact like this would have an effect to some extent. In actual fact, Fianna had been using this method to treat Kamito all this time.

Rinslet used her fingers to lightly remove Kamito's winter clothing then she unbuttoned his uniform.

Sweet breath. Dangling from the side of her cheeks, her long hair touched him... So tickling.

(...This is bad.)

Helpless to resist, Kamito could only exclaim in his heart.

(...Because my eyes are closed, all sorts of messed up imaginings are popping up in my mind!)

His outer uniform was completely removed, leaving just a shirt when Rinslet stopped. As one would expect, direct bodily contact with Kamito was probably very embarrassing.

"Umm, w-what need to be done next?"

Riding on Kamito's body, Rinslet sounded uncertain.

"Hey, Rinslet... Umm, you don't have to force yourself..."

"I am not forcing myself..."

She instantly retorted.

"A

"...!?"

Kamito felt a sensation from his lips.

"Mmm... Mmm...♪"

Rinslet extended her tongue, moist with saliva—

Instantly, Kamito felt vigor suddenly injected into his body.

(...This... is...)

A gentle light seeped into every nook and cranny in his body, sweeping away the fatigue in his limbs completely. Perhaps because she could feel the healing power working its effects, Rinslet pressed her lips down even more forcefully.

"Smooch... Mmm, huff... Mmm, mmm...♪"

"...Rins... let... enough...!"

Not because of pain but due to excessive embarrassment, Kamito could not help but cry out.

Part 4

Several minutes later, the two of them were sitting back to back in order to avoid eye contact.

...The exceptionally awkward atmosphere hung in the air.

"U-Umm..."

Already dressed properly, Rinslet spoke up.

"I-I, umm... just now, did something so shameful."

"N-Not at all. You did it for the sake of healing. Thanks to you, I've recovered much of my stamina."

Kamito shook his right arm. Although it was still hurting to some extent, it no longer hindered his movements.

"...The blizzard doesn't look like it'll stop any time soon, so let's rest here a bit for now."

"You're right..."

Rinslet nodded and started activating a fire spirit crystal. After placing the red-glowing mineral on the ground and pouring in divine power, a warm light of fire illuminated the ice cave.

Fenrir opened his great jaws and spat out cooking utensils.

Rinslet poured milk into a small pot which she then placed on top of the burning mineral.

"That said—"

Kamito turned towards Rinslet.

"What's up with that group of ice dragons?"

"...I have no idea either."

Rinslet shook her head.

"Besides, the ice dragons of Laurenfrost were supposed to have gone extinct several centuries earlier. Why would they suddenly appear in this place—"

"So in the end, it's still related to the current abnormal weather, right—?"

Supporting his chin with a hand, Kamito entered deep thought.

"Could it be that the blizzard on the mountain is actually those ice dragons' doing?"

According to legend, dragons possessed incredible powers different from spirit magic. Furthermore, when the six ice dragons appeared at the same time, Kamito clearly felt the blizzard increasing in strength.

"That possibility cannot be ruled out. There are still many unknown areas in research on dragon ecology."

Rinslet nodded in agreement.

After a short while, the milk in the pot boiled.

"...Okay, what should we do next?"

Taking a sip of steaming hot milk, Kamito sighed. Rather than staying here and waiting to be frozen to death, he would prefer to simply take a gamble with the ice cave's labyrinth—

"Let us wait a little and see, shall we? The blizzard is not going to stop and we have no idea if it might let up a little. What I'll do now is prepare a portion of special pancakes first."

Holding a frying pan, Rinslet smiled nonchalantly.

"...I'm really sorry. It's my willfulness that got you caught up in all this."

"There is no need to feel guilty. I was the one who insisted on leading the way for you."

Rinslet flipped the pan that was being heated over the fire.

Fresh hot pancakes were served on a plate with a generous helping of butter and honey.

As the sweet aroma filled the air, Kamito's stomach rumbled and growled.

"Come, please enjoy—"

With the steaming plate brought before his eyes, Kamito instantly picked up a piece with his fork.

...Munch munch.

"...This is great!"

The soft and spongy texture, with honey absorbed in it, melted in his mouth. Not only that, but the edges were crunchy like a biscuit's.

Kamito finished a pancake within the blink of an eye.

"Kamito-san, you look like you are quite enjoying it."

"...Yeah, because it's really tasty."

Kamito made a thumbs up. Rinslet smiled radiantly.

Nevertheless, her face was soon shrouded in gloom.

"...For some reason I do not know why, I am suddenly reminded of her."

Rinslet murmured softly.

"...Her?"

"Yes, this pancake was her favorite."

Kamito suddenly remembered what Rinslet had said in her dreams the previous night.

"...That's your little sister, right...? The one who got sealed in cursed ice by the «Elemental Lord»."

Rinslet nodded.

"That was four years ago. Back then, she was only nine..."

Watching the sparks erupting from the spirit crystal, Rinslet continued.

—It was roughly several months before the incident of the «Calamity Queen»'s betrayal. That year, the Laurenfrost region was holding a traditional «Great Snow Festival».

In past years, Rinslet had always performed the princess maiden's «Kagura» dance offering as the eldest daughter. But that year, it happened to be Judia's debut as a princess maiden on her ninth birthday, standing before the Laurenfrost subjects.

Just having turned nine, she was entering this kind of stage for the first time.

"Judia is a very endearing child and naturally gifted. However--"

The «Kagura» dance she performed had incurred the «Water Elemental Lord»'s ire. Rather, the «Water Elemental Lord» back then was corrupted by the «Otherworldly Darkness» and already in a complete state of insanity.

Judia's ritual had angered the mad elemental lord by chance.

"Of course, my father exhausted all possible solutions. He gathered all the princess maidens in Laurenfrost to offer «Kagura», trying to appease the elemental lord's wrath. However, no matter what they tried, they still could not melt the cursed ice..."

Hence, Rinslet had decided to participate in the «Blade Dance» tournament. Just like how Ren Ashbell, that «Strongest Blade Dancer», had offered blade dances to the «Elemental Lords» three years ago, successfully placating their wrath—

"Hence, Kamito-san, I can understand your feelings for wanting to seek someone precious to you."

Rinslet looked at Kamito's left hand, the back of the hand where the spirit seal had vanished.

"I too, shall absolutely not abandon Judia."

"Yes, well said."

Kamito clenched his fist.

(...That's right, I must bring her back.)

Even if it meant chasing to the farthest ends of the world—

...Tug. Tug tug.

Feeling a sudden tugging at his sleeve, Kamito looked back.

"—Kamito, I am hungry too."

Materializing, Est was demanding food again.

"Est, you've been working hard too."

"Yes!"

Kamito caressed Est's head, causing her to half-close her eyes from the pleasure.

"There's Rinslet's special pancakes here and canned peaches."

"No beancurd?"

"Uh, that's a bit too..."

"Yes, we do&mash;"

"Really!?"

With a snap of her finger, Rinslet took out a white object from Fenrir's mouth... Beancurd that was frozen solid.

"Can this be eaten directly?"

"No, I have to boil it again first."

Placing a pot on the burning spirit crystal, she added a large amount of snow.

As soon as the water boiled, she threw the frozen beancurd into the pot.

"Beancurd, beancurd♪"

Est's mysterious violet eyes flashed with the light of excitement while she was humming a strange song.

"This is the dish known as boiled beancurd."

"Boiled beancurd, boiled beancurd♪"

Humming a song expressionlessly, Est kept staring at the pot intently.

Seeing Est like that, Kamito smiled—

"...K-Kamito-san!"

Rinslet suddenly stood up and pointed outside the ice cave.

"Hmm?"

Kamito turned to look—

In the next instant, he was so shocked that his mouth gaped wide open and said the same thing as Rinslet.

"...The blizzard stopped?"

Part 5

"—Luminaris-sama, the stone monuments suspected as part of the «Barrier»'s foundation have all been destroyed."

Special operative Ayla reported to Luminaris.

"Good work... Turning out as predicted, the «Barrier»'s disorienting mist effects have weakened."

Just as Luminaris pointed out, the drifting fog was much thinner than several hours earlier. Just now, it was a place where one could hardly see a step ahead, but now it was possible to see the several trees in front of them.

"Everyone, the destination is ahead. Let us set forth for the «Forest Dwellers»'s village."

"Affirmative."

Giving her fatigued subordinates encouragement, she advanced further into the «Forest of Ice Blossoms» which was still snowing.

Assuming the «Barrier»'s effects were gradually going to weaken in this manner, they were going to see their destination eventually. It was

unknown whether the «Forest Dwellers» had elementalists who controlled combat-type spirits, but even if they did, they were surely going to be defeated by the «Sacred Spirit Knights».

Luminaris swung her sacred sword, chopping the branches blocking the way. Just at that moment—

The sound of giant flapping wings could be heard overhead.

"...What!?"

The surrounding fog was blown away in an instant while a powerful blizzard swept through the forest.

"...What is going on!?"

"Luminaris-sama, look over there quick!"

Her adjutant, Alda, was pointing above.

"...Could it be... dragons... no way!?"

Luminaris was speechless.

Looking up at the gray sky through the tree branches, they could see a group of giant dragons was flying in the air.

Scales flashing ice-blue light. These were precisely the ice dragons inhabiting the north part of the continent.

Normally, dragons could not possibly move in groups due to their highly territorial nature. But dozens of dragons were currently flying overhead as though under central command, moving in a fixed formation.

The blizzard blew stronger and stronger, mercilessly attacking the girls who were cornered, unable to advance or retreat.

"Luminaris-sama...!" "This forest, what on earth...!?"

The ice dragons roared.

Eyes flashing with crimson light, they stared like predators at Luminaris and her group on the ground.

"—They're coming! «Elemental Waffe», release!"

Drawing her sword in a stance, Luminaris yelled.

Part 6

(...Although human... yet different from humans... The «Queen of Ice Blossoms»...)

Left all alone with nothing to do, Restia was thinking over these things in her tent.

The girl who had appeared in the forest, possessing unbelievable powers.

The princess maiden Rana had said that Restia resembled that queen very much. However, Restia did not have the power to control ice dragons. Neither did she need to sleep for many days to store up power.

(...Or perhaps, it's just a visual resemblance?)

Sitting on the bed, Restia cocked her head to listen.

Noisy sounds of people running around were coming from outside the tent.

...Something had happened, apparently.

Walking outside in bare feet, she discovered it was the noise from children gathering in the plaza.

"...Hey, did something happen?"

Blocking one of the boys, Restia asked.

"...This is bad, the forest's fog is dispersing!"

"...Fog?"

Restia tilted her head in puzzlement.

"Umm, is it that serious?"

"The barrier is broken! Soon, armed elementalists are going to storm this place!"

"...No way...!"

Restia went pale, all color of blood leaving her face.

"Umm, the barrier can't be repaired?"

"No way. Those people have destroyed the stone monuments serving as the barrier's foundation. Even if we repair them, there's not enough time now—"

The children's commotion became greater and greater.

(...It must be the work of those people hunting for me.)

Restia bit her lip hard.

Those pursuers were definitely not going to let these children go.

(...I must hurry and leave this place.)

Secretly, she made her decision. She must not bring calamity upon the «Forest Dwellers» on account of herself.

That said, she did not know where to go to leave this place.

"—Everyone, please calm down."

A solemn voice resounded in the plaza.

Emerging from the depths of the forest, it was the princess maiden Rana.

Looking as calm and composed as someone advanced in age, Rana walked over to the plaza.

"Don't worry, the «Queen of Ice Blossoms» has already summoned the ice dragons from the Kyria Mountain Range."

"Her Highness the Queen?"

"Yes. Also, Once the queen fully awakens, «Zirnitra»'s seal will be released. Then there is no need to rely on the «Barrier» anymore."

"Y-Yeah! You're right..."

Hearing Rana's confident speech, the children finally breathed a sigh of relief and nodded.

Seeing that, Restia instantly felt suspicions towards the «Queen of Ice Blossoms».

(...Even at a time like this, she still has not appeared.)

Hence, she walked over to Rana who was standing in the center of the plaza—

"Where is that «Queen of Ice Blossoms» currently?"

A sharp voice.

"Didn't I mention before? Her Highness the Queen is currently sleeping in the shrine to accumulate power."

"Does the queen you speak of really exist?"

"She'll awaken very soon. The princess maidens are already preparing to welcome her arrival—"

"Yes, that's right.." "Onee-chan, don't worry. It'll be fine."

Restia shook her head lightly.

"I am truly grateful to you all for hiding me here. But the one the pursuers want is me. As long as I leave this place, you'll be fine."

Just as Restia turned around, intending to walk towards the forest—

"—You can't."

Restia's feet felt as though they had been nailed to the ground.

Suddenly, she was unable to move, as though paralyzed.

"...What... is going on...?"

"—I'm very sorry."

Rana's crimson eyes stared at Restia.

"Hiding you here is the will of the «Queen of Ice Blossoms». If you try to leave, I cannot turn a blind eye—"

"...The will of the «Queen of Ice Blossoms»?"

Restia felt confused. What on earth was the reason—

"—Rana-sama!"

Running over from the depths of the forest, princess maidens showed panic on their faces.

"What's the matter?"

"Th-The shrine's situation—"

Rana was shocked.

"...Let's hurry over. You come along too."

"...What?"

Restia suddenly regained her body's freedom.

"—The «Queen of Ice Blossoms» has awakened."

Part 7

The Ordesia Empire's capital—«Ostdakia».

Commonly known as the «Imperial Capital», the city was formerly the town that the army led by Sacred Maiden Areishia had used as their stronghold during the Demon King War a thousand years earlier.

This town was merely a rural municipality back when the Demon King War ended, but thereafter, it began to flourish as the Ordesia Empire's military center, then gradually developed into its political center.

Moving the capital from «Nebrasia» in present-day Fahrengart territory happened roughly six centuries ago. From then on, it became one of the continent's most prosperous cities along with the Quina Empire's «Realm Capital» and the Holy Kingdom of Lugia's «Alexandria».

This imperial capital was where factions from the continent's various nations had gathered for the upcoming «All Nations Conference».

"...It's completely different from the Academy that's surrounded by the «Spirit Forest»."

The current location was a room in the Nefescal Palace in the city center.

Looking out into the streets from a window in the room, Fianna sighed.

"...The air here seems frozen solid."

"Princess, please try to keep still."

"Yes, yes..."

The handmaiden's chattering while tying the corset was making Fianna impatient. Fianna was currently putting on a glamorous white dress, a fitting match for her lustrous black hair and silver-white tiara.

Looking at the giant mirror hanging on the wall in the room, Fianna sighed again.

"Excuse me? Must I wear this no matter what?"

"Yes. There are rules prescribing the attire of princesses when summoned for an audience."

The handmaiden replied indifferently without changing her expression.

(...So boring.)

The handmaidens of the palace only treated Fianna as the Empire's second princess. They only served her for her status as an imperial princess, that was all. Back when Fianna was known as the «Lost Queen» and locked away in the palace, like those hated nobles, everyone was mocking her behind her back.

...Unlike her friends at the Academy who had fought alongside one another during the «Blade Dance» tournament.

With dusk-colored eyes a little gloomy, Fianna looked into the mirror again.

(...No matter what, I really miss Kamito-kun.)

That was what Fianna was thinking about.

As soon as she finished putting on her dress, there was a knock at the door.

"—It is almost time, Second Princess. Preparations are due for welcoming the various nations' representatives—"

Appearing at the door was a silver-haired spirit knight dressed in formal knight attire.

Fourth of the «Numbers»—Dunei Lampert, a spirit knight who had contracted with a spirit of the earth.

Fianna was not good at dealing with someone with an forthright and straitlaced personality like hers.

"...Understood."

Fianna sighed again, rising from her chair.

Walking along the corridor of the magnificent hanging gardens, they made their way to the great hall where the All Nations Conference was to be held.

"Aren't they making too big a deal out of things by asking you, a member of the «Numbers» to serve as my bodyguard?"

"It would be best if you would understand your own position better. You are currently the Empire's second princess. The most important person after His Highness Arneus and Her Highness Linnea—"

Dunei spoke without looking back while leading the way.

"Is there anyone in this imperial capital who would dare to target my life?"

"Last night, Balsas Prison was attacked by persons unknown."

"...Impossible!?"

Balsas Prison was a fortress located on the north side of the imperial capital. Originally built as a garrison post for the Anti-Demon King army, it was later converted to be used as the Empire's most secure prison. To think someone would attack this prison that was protected by powerful guardian spirits and numerous spirit knights, it was completely unbelievable.

"The perpetrators broke into the prison using a militarized spirit. Several of the prisoners in the lowest level escaped. Jio Inzagi, the merchant woman from «Murders» and the Fahrengart daughter—"

"Velsaria Eva?"

Fianna asked without thinking. The other two aside, Velsaria was supposed to be staying voluntarily in the deepest and harshest level of the prison to atone for her sins. To think she would do something like escaping from prison—

"And the perpetrators' identities?"

"«Umbr» is currently investigating. The perpetrators' objectives are still unclear but we cannot rule out the possibility of them targeting you,

Princess. Hence, it is necessary to place a trustworthy bodyguard by your side."

"You're saying that the «Numbers» are trustworthy?"

Fianna's words brought awkwardness to Dunei's face.

The miraculous hands of healing—Lurie Lizaldia's betrayal had only occurred recently.

Succeeding in cracking that poker face, Fianna shrugged with slight satisfaction.

"But back to the subject, what meaning is there behind asking me to attend the «All Nations Conference»?"

"Your Highness Fianna, you are the elementalist approved by the imperial family's guardian spirit, «Georgios». Right now, there is probably no one in the palace who would dare underestimate you anymore."

"How fickle. I thought I've clearly abandoned the title of the second princess a long time ago."

"It is not something that can be abandoned so easily. This is the responsibility of royalty."

"...Yes, I understand."

Fianna bit her lip hard.

"There is also a sizable number of supporters who wish to nominate you as the successor to the throne instead of His Highness Arneus."

"You say that even as a member of «Numbers»?"

"I am simply reporting objective facts."

"..."

Among all the nations on the continent, there were virtually no cases of princess maidens ruling countries as sovereigns.

That was because princess maidens possessing the power of spirit contracts were all gathered at the «Divine Ritual Institute» where they were isolated from the mundane world. It was common belief that princess

maidens' responsibilities lay with administering various rites and there was no need for them to care about political matters.

Hence, the Ordesia Empire had a custom of prioritizing male succession to the throne. Once the emperor abdicated, Fianna's elder brother, two years her senior, was supposed to succeed to the throne.

But there was a huge problem.

(...Arneus doesn't have what it takes to be emperor. All the citizens of the Empire know that.)

Fianna recalled images of his cruel visage, that of a person whom she had despised since childhood. In actual fact, there were people in the imperial council who had suggested bringing back First Princess Linnea who had entered the «Divine Ritual Institute» like Fianna, so that she could be wed to an influential noble.

But compared to the elder sister who had entered the «Divine Ritual Institute», support for Fianna had also grown louder after she regained her power of the spirit contract. Ironically, her performance at the «Blade Dance» was precisely why she had gained the support of so many people.

(...What a pain.)

Fianna sighed. Unwilling to get caught up in the games of power struggles, she had never entertained the thought of marriage with influential nobles.

(...In my heart, I already have someone I love.)

Walking downstairs, they came to a great hall on the first floor.

Standing there was the person she wished to see the least.

"Hmph, well isn't this the useless «Lost Queen» eh? To think you'd be shameless enough to come sauntering back."

Dressed in grand imperial attire was a black-haired young man. Although quite good-looking in facial features, the cold light in his eyes rendered his handsome face a total waste.

Arneus Ray Ordesia—Fianna's elder brother.

"—Greetings to you, dear esteemed brother."

Fianna greeted politely without any emotion at all.

Just as she was about to enter the great hall directly—

"—Not so fast."

He yelled with agitation, stepping on the hem of her dress.

"How else may I help you?"

"...Cut the pretense. By this point, what are your intentions in returning to the palace?"

"I only returned because I was summoned by His Majesty the Emperor."

"Hmph, who knows. In the imperial council, there seems to be people recommending you as the successor to the throne."

Arneus look at Fianna with eyes of suspicion.

"I—"

Just as Fianna was about to refute him...

"Excuse me, Your Highness Arneus—"

Dunei interrupted.

"...What now?"

"Please set aside your conversation with your sister for now. The princess is currently required to greet our guests from various nations."

Staring at Dunei, the color of fear flashed across Arneus's eyes for an instant.

"...Tsk, a knight huh."

Arneus clicked his tongue and departed. Adjusting the hem of her dress, Fianna lamented.

"...Still hasn't changed the slightest, that person."

Leaving Dunei at the door, Fianna entered the great hall.

A giant table was prepared in the center of the hall. Furthest at the back was the seat of the Ordesian Emperor, Ugust Ray Ordesia.

Next to him were Prime Minister Duke Conrad Cygnus Fahrengart, Margrave Gryas Laurenfrost and other top nobles of the Empire.

At the same time, Greyworth was present, dressed in formal knight attire. Formerly known as the continent's strongest spirit knight, the «Dusk Witch» still carried a powerful presence about her despite having retired.

Fianna greeted the emperor then sat down next to Greyworth.

"Wow, you look good in a dress too. Why don't you show it to the lad?"

"Well, no matter how I dress up to seduce him, Kamito-kun is always... Hey, now is not the time for jokes, Academy Director."

Fianna pouted and asked quietly:

"...Umm, how is Kamito-kun right now?"

"The lad should be on a journey to Laurenfrost right now."

"...Huh?"

Hearing an unexpected answer, Fianna could not help but exclaim.

"Why would he go to Laurenfrost?"

"...I'll tell you the details later. In any case, it's related to the darkness spirit."

Greyworth whispered quietly in her ear. Fianna nodded lightly.

"I heard that the Kyria Mountain Range is under rare heavy snowfall at the moment..."

"Well, he'll always find a way. Margrave Laurenfrost's daughter also went along."

"...Rinslet is with him as well?"

Fianna pouted.

"...Could it be that, a private trip for t-two? Is that what's going on!?"

"Fufu? Worried about the lad?"

"...Yes. In another sense."

Fianna sighed again.

"—Let us welcome the arrival of the representatives of all nations."

The voice of a guard was heard from outside the hall.

Entering the hall one after another were representatives from the continent's handful of major powers—the Quina Empire, the Dragon Empire of Dracunia, the Kingdom of Balstan and the Holy Kingdom of Lugia.

Dracunia's diplomatic delegation included the Dragon Princess, Leonora Lancaster, whom Fianna's team had fought in the «Blade Dance». This time, she was wearing a gorgeous formal dress rather than the military uniform of the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor». Of course, that «Dragon Slayer» sword was not by her side either.

The Alphas Theocracy's delegation had not arrived yet. The most pressing matter on the agenda at this All Nations Conference was Sjora Kahn's coup d'etat. One of the reasons why Fianna was asked to join this conference was because she had directly interacted with Sjora during the «Blade Dance».

"—Fianna, pay close attention to what the Holy Kingdom's representative says."

Greyworth whispered in her ear.

"The Holy Kingdom, huh?"

"A witch's intuition. Lately, the Holy Kingdom's movements have been quite unusual. According to my judgment, those people were also involved in the Theocracy's internal strife."

The piercing stare of Greyworth's gray eyes were directed at the cardinals dressed in vestments of pure white.

"...I have no intention of getting involved with politics."

"Whether it is your wish or not, destiny will always descend. The lad never wished for the «Demon King»'s destiny either—"

Staring off into the distance, Greyworth murmured softly to herself.

Chapter 6 - Winter Gulf Castle

Part 1

It was already dark by the time Kamito and Rinslet crossed the Kyria Mountain Range and reached the foot of the mountains.

Stars were shining in the night sky while light produced by spirits flickered in the dense forest.

"...Although it's dark, at least we finally arrived."

While shaking off the large amount of snow on his winter clothing, Kamito exhaled white mist.

Thanks to the blizzard subsiding, getting down the mountain was not as tough as when they were climbing it. But due to depleting all excess stamina in the battle against the ice dragon, his body's fatigue was soon reaching a limit.

So those «Ice Dragons» were the cause of the blizzard after all, huh?

If that were the case, then why did they suddenly disappear from the mountain range—?

"We will arrive presently at «Winter Gulf». Look, watchfires can be seen outside the forest."

Sitting on Fenrir's back, Rinslet pointed to the other end of the coniferous forest.

Under the night sky, numerous watchfires could be seen illuminating the castle's walls of stone.

Rather than a grand castle symbolizing authority and prestige, the castle was built in a simple and sturdy style that emphasized practicality.

After walking a while in the forest, Kamito and Rinslet arrived at a stone-paved road.

This was the road system that was spread throughout the entire Ordesia Empire's territory. The stone-paved surface was slippery when frozen but after the residents' snow shoveling, it was much better than the snow-covered paths in the forest.

"I'll have the people in the castle make preparations to welcome us."

Rinslet patted Fenrir on the back.

Standing in one spot, the demon ice spirit howled lengthily towards the night sky.

...After a while, the watchfires on the castle walls flickered greatly.

"Looks like they noticed us."

After walking along the road for a while, they were finally able to see Winter Gulf Castle's gates.

Standing respectfully at the castle gates, dozens of guards welcomed the Margrave's daughter.

"As expected of the Laurenfrost family's precious daughter."

"...Can't stand it, that girl always loves to make such a big deal out of things."

Rinslet seemed to be grumbling in embarrassment.

Once the two of them neared the castle gates, a petite girl hurried over, dressed from head to toe in furry winter gear.

"...Onee-sama! It's really Onee-sama!"

Possessing the same eyes of emerald as Rinslet's, a young girl with platinum blonde hair glittering under the light reflected off the snow—The Laurenfrost family's third daughter, Mireille Laurenfrost jumped into her sister's bosom with running momentum.

"E-Enough! Know some restraint, Mireille."

Despite putting on airs as a strict elder sister, Rinslet still stroked her sister's head gently with her hand.

Withdrawing her head from being buried in Rinslet's bosom, Mireille asked:

"But I was really startled, Onee-sama. You suddenly returned without informing us. There was no letter saying you wanted to come home... By the way, how did you cross that Kyria Mountain Range?"

She blinked her round eyes.

"We forced our way through... It was really tough. Without Kamito-san, perhaps I would have become an ice sculpture by now—"

"...Kamito-san?"

Tilting her head, Mireille turned to a different direction.

Seeing that, Kamito raised the hood of his winter coat.

"Yo—"

"...O-Onii-sama!?"

Staring wide eyed, Mireille looked back and forth between Kamito and Rinslet's faces.

"N-No way... Onee-sama, did you come home to report your marriage with Onii-sama...?"

"N-No, of course not!"

Rinslet frantically denied.

"Oh dear, Onee-sama, you're going red in the face."

Mireille peeked at her sister's face hidden under the hood.

Then at this moment, she was grabbed by the neck and dragged away from behind.

"Mireille, stop teasing milady."

Speaking in a monotonous voice was a cute girl dressed as a maid.

She had slightly wavy dark-brown hair and heterochromic eyes. Her complexion was as white as snow while her face was as exquisite as a doll's.

"Milla, how are you?"

Kamito greeted casually but Milla Bassett instantly went red in the face and avoided eye contact.

"...Kamito, why are you here?"

"Oh, that's because I need to do something in Laurenfrost. Rinslet is my guide."

"...I see, your purpose is not accompanying Rinslet-sama back home to get married."

Milla exhaled deeply as though greatly relieved.

"O-Of course! How could even you misunderstand as well, Milla!?"

Rinslet coughed lightly and placed her hand at her waist.

"In any case, Kamito-san is already very tired from the long journey. Prepare some hot food. And a bath too—"

"Yes, all prepared already."

"Wow, not bad at all, different from Carol..."

Kamito could not help but exclaim, impressed at Milla's instant reply.

Part 2

After taking off his snow-covered clothing, Kamito was taken to the castle hall.

Designed as fortress, Winter Gulf Castle was equally modest in furnishings as its exterior appearance. The stone walls were virtually devoid of fancy decoration while the only exception was the chandeliers ornamented with a large number of spirit crystals to produce an atmosphere of grandeur.

"Did you grow up here, Rinslet and Mireille?"

"No, there's a house we live in at the castle town."

Mireille shook her head to answer Kamito's question.

"After all, this Winter Gulf Castle is a stronghold used for military purposes."

Saying that, Rinslet activated a large spirit crystal that was installed at the fireplace.

Glowing red, the spirit crystal warmed up the air in the hall within the blink of an eye.

Then she sat down at a large eight-person table in the center of the hall. Mireille and Milla took their seats on her left and right while Kamito sat

opposite to her as the guest. Ordinary maids would not eat on the same table as nobles but Milla was apparently an exception.

"It's such a shame that Father and Mother are away when you've made a rare return home, Onee-sama."

"It can't be helped that I just missed them."

Their parents, Margrave and Lady Laurenfrost had apparently gone to the imperial capital to attend the «All Nations Conference». Since they had taken the long route around the Kyria Mountain Range, they had set off several days prior.

"But it's a rare chance to introduce Onii-sama—"

"Enough, Mireille!"

Rinslet frantically covered up Mireille's mouth.

Kamito forced a laugh then asked:

"...Uh, since Margrave and Lady Laurenfrost are away, does that mean that you're the temporary master of the castle, Mireille?"

"Yes. I have been managing this castle seriously."

Hmph hmph, Mireille childishly puffed out her chest in pride.

"...Say, are you really okay on your own?"

Becoming the temporary master of the castle at the young age of nine was very impressive, but it was still a bit worrying.

"Don't worry. Because there are excellent knights at Laurenfrost."

Milla spoke expressionlessly.

"This Winter Gulf Castle has seven spirit knights stationed. They are elite spirit knights, rigorously selected and can handle simple government affairs for the most part."

"...I see. As expected of a castle belonging to high nobility."

There were actually very few castles that had as many as seven spirit knights. Many regional castle lords did not even have a single knight serving them exclusively.

"I don't leave everything to the knights. I've been stamping paperwork properly too."

Mireille pouted unhappily.

Just at this moment...

"—Sorry for the delay, milady."

The door to the hall opened as maids pushed in carts laden with food.

Dressed in adorable uniforms, the maids deftly moved the steaming-hot luxurious offerings to the table.

Lamb pie that was baked crispy. Winter melon soup that was flavored with plenty of spices. There was also salted cod, boiled quail eggs and a bean dish served in a hollowed out pumpkin. Served on a large plate was the main dish, a deer roast, honey-roasted to perfection.

"Wow...!"

The aromas drifting in the hall were making Kamito's stomach rumble.

Just as he swallowed his saliva—

"...A thousand apologies. We could only prepare a simple dinner at short notice."

A maid was bowing her head, seemingly in shame.

"No no... Was all this made just now?"

"Indeed. Had we known milady's return ahead of time, we could have specially prepared a feast..."

The maid murmured with chagrin while the other girls nodded one after another in agreement.

(...Th-They're way too competent!)

...Kamito was speechless.

Speaking of Laurenfrost maids, perhaps his perceptions of them being selected on basis of cuteness only were colored by his first impressions of the useless maid Carol.

"Kamito, the one who made that baked pie is me."

Milla pointed out calmly.

"Oh, then I've gotta try this—"

Slicing up the pie, Kamito brought a morsel to his mouth.

(...W-What is this!? It's too delicious!)

After a single bite, Kamito widened his eyes.

As soon as he bit the pie's crust, the juicy filling flowed out.

"...How is it?"

"...!"

Kamito silently made a thumbs up. Despite the simplicity of the dish, it was a modest and sincere flavor.

"You're quite good at cooking, Milla."

"...No. I am simply following the directions of my seniors."



Milla spoke expressionlessly then blushed and bowed her head.

"—Kamito, let me try too."

"E-Est!?"

Without him noticing, the sword spirit had materialized next to Kamito already.

Opening her dainty mouth, she stared straight at Kamito just like a young bird waiting to be fed.

"...I surrender, Est."

Chuckling wryly a few times, Kamito delivered a sliced piece of pie into Est's mouth.

"...Mmm, so tasty, Kamito."

"Onii-sama, that's unfair if you just do it for Miss Spirit!"

Mireille leaned over the table and opened her mouth with an "ah~"

"M-Mireille!?"

"That is too unseemly, Mireille!"

Rinslet grabbed the hem of Mireille's clothing.

"Oh my, then how about you feed Onee-sama a bite too?"

"...Th-That... That kind of thing, no way..."

Hearing that, Rinslet's face went red as she held her face in her hands.

"—No, Kamito is my Onii-chan."

As though competing with Mireille, Est clutched Kamito's uniform tightly.

Part 3

After enjoying the hot dinner prepared by the maids of the Laurenfrost household...

"—Natalia, report the situation."

While sipping black tea after the meal, Rinslet inquired of the head maid.

The head maid was an older girl with shoulder-length hair. She was also apparently responsible for the cooking earlier.

"Have you gathered the reason for the blizzard at the Kyria Mountain Range?"

"—Yes, the persistent snowfall over the past few days was undoubtedly the work of «Ice Dragons» roaming the mountain range."

The head maid answered calmly.

"Just as expected, I see..."

"The problem is why would the extinct ice dragons appear."

The head maid nodded slightly at what Rinslet pointed out.

"This is merely my personal speculation but—"

"Not a problem. Please speak your mind."

"Perhaps it has something to do with the «Forest Dwellers» inhabiting the «Forest of Ice Blossoms»."

"...What is that about?"

Rinslet frowned.

"Ice dragons are the minions of the spirit «Zirnitra». And the «Forest Dwellers» revere «Zirnitra» as the guardian of the «Forest of Ice Blossoms», worshipping since olden times—"

"In other words, the «Forest Dwellers» are summoning ice dragons in some manner and controlling them?"

"That possibility cannot be ruled out."

Hearing Rinslet's suggestion, the head maid nodded in agreement.

"—Excuse me, what are «Forest Dwellers»?"

Kamito interrupted at this point.

"It's a name for the Elfim race who lives in the deepest part of the «Forest of Ice Blossoms»."

"...The Elfim huh."

A highly mysterious race who had come from «Astral Zero» in antiquity.

Excellent ability to commune with spirits, preferring to spend their days quietly in the forest, but on the flip side, they extremely rejected and resented contact with humans.

—This was what Kamito had heard from Lily Flame back during his «Instructional School» days.

"Supposing that's the case, why can't you ask them directly?"

"Yes. We have sent messengers many times to attempt contact, but a powerful barrier of fog was deployed in the depths of the forest, even making it impossible to reach their settlement."

"...An Elfim barrier huh. Now that's tricky stuff."

"Yes, and we can't recklessly destroy the «Barrier»—"

Not confined to Ordesia territory, the Elfim race had also settled and established secure communities in various nations on the continent. Suppose the Laurenfrost ruler invaded the Elfim settlement here, it would probably make the entire Elfim race enemies of the Empire given their strong sense of racial solidarity—

Suddenly, a thought came to Kamito.

"...Those «Forest Dwellers», what are the chances that Restia's come into contact with them?"

"...I remember that the Elfim basically revere spirits. We can't rule out the possibility that Miss Darkness Spirit accidentally entered the barrier..."

Rinslet nodded, resting her chin on her hand.

Kamito turned to the head maid.

"...Do you have any reports about a girl in a black one-piece dress seen in the forest?"

Natalia made an expression of disbelief in response to Kamito's question.

"No, the branches in the «Forest of Ice Blossoms» are as sharp as knives. Consequently, well, I believe that it is quite difficult to make one's way through the forest in attire like a dress—"

"...I see."

...In the end, this Winter Gulf Castle had not obtained any information on her.

Not to mean he doubted Iseria Seaward's information, but Kamito still had trouble hiding his disappointment.

"But speaking of which—"

"...You have some kind of lead?"

Kamito leaned forward.

"Not exactly, but a messenger sent to the forest returned with concerning news—"

"...What?"

"Reportedly, a human princess maiden has appeared in the «Forest Dwellers» settlement."

"...A human princess maiden?"

Kamito repeated.

"Indeed. The forest dwellers apparently call the girl «Queen of Ice Blossoms»."

Part 4

After dinner, Kamito decided to head over to his assigned room to wait for dawn.

Trying to search for Restia in the forest at night was virtually impossible. And since there was a barrier deployed, it was also necessary to prepare for negotiations with forest dwellers.

Rinslet promised to borrow eight trained hunting hounds. Although Kamito had no idea whether hunting hounds were able to track down Restia who was a spirit, but they should come in handy when frequenting a dangerous forest.

Speaking of which—

(...«Queen of Ice Blossoms» huh.)

Walking on the path to his room, Kamito muttered to himself.

This really was quite concerning news.

According to the head maid, messengers sent to the forest had met an Elfim princess maiden who had inquired. The girl had apparently gotten the wrong idea that the messenger was there to take back the human princess maiden—the «Queen of Ice Blossoms».

In the end, the messenger apparently ended up as a target for arrows and had to flee for his dear life.

(...Can't be Restia—Right?)

Indeed, Restia's appearance was no different from a human girl's.

The jet-black wings could also disappear in accordance with her will.

—At this moment, Kamito reached the door to a room. There was a wolf emblem on the door.

"It's here, right...?"

After pushing the door open...

"..."

...Time stopped.

Milla Bassett was on the bed, hugging Kamito's pillow.

"Uh... Milla, what are you doing?"

"Bed-making."

"No, but..."

"Bed-making."

"...I-I see."

"Yes..."

Milla nodded expressionlessly then nonchalantly started putting the sheets in order.

"Are you getting used to life here?"

"Mireille-sama treats others very well. Natalia-sama is also teaching me the work."

"...That's the head maid just now, right? She seems very excellent at her job."

"Of course. Natalia-sama belongs to the «Wolf Ritters» of Laurenfrost."

"...Huh?"

Kamito was taken aback.

"...What do you mean?"

"Exactly what the words say. The head maid is the captain of the knights at this castle."

"...You must be kidding, right?"

"Absolutely serious."

Milla replied with a serious expression.

"W-Why is a spirit knight serving as a maid?"

"Knights should take the lead to serve a role models for the people. This is one of the Laurenfrost family traditions."

"Well yeah, I guess. Rinslet is even more pro than a real maid."

Should one say, like master, like knight?

"I will also become a splendid maid, then cultivate Mireille-sama into a full-fledged noble."

After making the bed, Milla looked into Kamito's face and said:

"Not a tool for the military—That is my new way of life that you taught me."

She blushed in her cheeks while clenching her fist tightly.

"...Ahhh."

...She's changed, Kamito thought.

Formerly the possessor of a «Demon Sealing Eye», she was used as a tool of war in the past. But currently, she had found something she wanted to do on her own volition.

...It was quite an amazing thing.

"But I think it's a bit of a challenge to cultivate Mireille into an full-fledged noble."

Hearing that, Milla calmly shook her head.

"Mireille-sama will surely turn out as a splendid noble, because she is a very serious child at heart."

"...Oh okay, that's true too."

Kamito smiled wryly and turned his gaze outside the room.

Kamito had noticed their presence quite early on.

"...C-Cough."

"...Mireille?"

Milla exclaimed in surprise.

"I-I just happened to pass by, so I didn't hear anything!"

Mireille was panicking, a rare sight indeed, looking away in embarrassment.

"The bath is ready, Onii-sama."

"Okay, thanks."

"Kamito—"

Just as Kamito was about to leave the room, Milla spoke towards his back.

"Come—Kamito..."

"...Huh?"

"I will scrub your back for you. Because it is a maid's job."

Blushing red to her ears, Milla murmured expressionlessly.

"N-No thanks!"

Kamito shook his head and frantically left the room.

Part 5

..Splash. The sound of water was heard in the quiet night.

Long platinum blonde hair clung to tender skin.

Hugging her shivering body, Rinslet sighed.

Before heading off to a certain place next, she was cleansing her body as a precaution.

The bath at the Laurenfrost home was not a natural hot spring but heated using fire spirit crystals. Four years ago, this place was completely frozen all year round due to the «Calamity Queen»'s rebellion, but now, there was no problem with using it.

"...Mmm... Ah...♪"

Finding it difficult to control her body that felt like it was burning, Rinslet made a sound of annoyance.

"I-I seem a little strange...!"

Rubbing her thigh, she exhaled scorching breath.

She felt that the symptoms had started during the kiss with Kamito in the snow mountain, undertaken with intimate skin contact.

The sweet pain she experienced from that time continued to linger in her body without stopping.

And now, during a purification rite, it had turned into a raging torrent and was rushing out all at once.

(...I-It's almost as though Kamito-san is inside here...!)

Like shocked by electricity.

Every time she touched a sensitive spot on her skin, she felt a numbing feeling in her brain.

(...Ooh... W-What should I do!?)

Rinslet twisted her body, pouring bathwater over her head repeatedly.

...But her scorching body still did not cool down.

(...I-In such a state, how could I face that girl...)

—Just at this moment.

The sound of voices came outside the bath.

"...!?"

Part 6

"...Wow!"

Taken to the bath by Mireille, Kamito could not help but exclaim.

Before his eyes was a massive open-air bath built from marble. Hot water was running nonstop from a wolf sculpture carved on a pillar. Steam hung in the air over the entire bath.

Although it was not a natural hot spring, this was a grand bath that rivaled the Academy's purification site.

"Are you really sure I can have this place all to myself?"

"Yes, no one uses it at this time. Feel free to swim in the bath."

"...No, I'm already past the age of swimming in baths."

"Oh my, but even nowadays, Onee-sama still practices swimming in the bath."

"Speaking of which, Rinslet can't swim..."

Kamito recalled teaching her to swim at «Ragna Ys».

...That was perhaps the only weakness of this perfect well-bred lady who was able to do anything.

"Then please enjoy the Laurenfrost bath thoroughly, Onii-sama."

Smiling mischievously, Mireille returned to the corridor.

"Oh, thanks for showing me the way."

Kamito swiftly undressed, went to the purification area to cleanse his body, then soaked himself in the tub.

The water temperature was not too high and controlled just right. His cold skin quickly warmed up.

(...Phew.)

Soaked in the tub, Kamito breathed out in relief.

Looking up at the night sky where cold winds howled, he began to reminisce about her.

(...Seriously, will we meet again? Restia—)

«Water Elemental Lord» Iseria Seaward had brought a sliver of faint hope.

But no matter how faint, he had no choice but to gamble on it now.

Iseria's observation might have simply been mistaken. Besides, Restia should have no connection to the Laurenfrost region. Even if Restia was still alive, what reason was there for her to appear in this kind of forest on the border—

(...But if that's the case—)

Kamito murmured in his heart.

(—It wouldn't explain why the Holy Kingdom's knights are infiltrating this forest.)

The «Sacred Spirit Knights» had invaded this forest on the border even willingly bearing the risk of trespassing the Empire's boundary. Surely there must be some goal there.

Their presence served as counterfactual evidence that Restia might be here.

(Luminaris Saint Leisched—The «Sacred Sword» user huh.)

Kamito closed his eyes and recalled the opponent from three years ago.

A knight with brilliant and striking blonde hair and clear ice-blue eyes.

She had exhibited overwhelming power at the tournament three years ago.

Right now, she would be even more powerful. On the same level as Dracunia's Leonora Lancaster, possibly superior.

—Gurgle.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of water.

(...Hmm?)

Kamito frowned and turned towards the source.

He could see the water surface bubbling behind a thick pillar of stone.

"...What?"

Finding it strange, Kamito approached. The area near the pillar was in the shade so he could not see clearly.

The bubbling at the water surface intensified.

Feeling puzzled, Kamito reached towards the bubbling water.

...Boing. Suddenly, his fingers touched something soft.

"...?"

Boing.

Boing. Boing. Boing.

(...Wait a sec, this feeling, no way...!)

Just as Kamito realized in surprise...

Splash, something emerged from under the water.

"S-Stop... Stop it right now!"

"...!?"

A blizzard instantly swept through the bath.

Part 7

...After the blizzard stopped.

"...~Tsk, s-so off-putting, Kamito-san is really such a pervert!"

Immersed in the water, Rinslet pouted and protested against Kamito.

"S-Sorry, I didn't do it on purpose... Say, why are you here?"

"Th-Those are my words to you!"

Rinslet glared viciously at him. She was apparently cleansing herself earlier but panicked and hid in the bath after hearing Kamito's voice suddenly outside.

"This purification facility is exclusively mine!"

"An exclusive purification facility? So this entire bathroom is for your personal use?"

"This is very normal for princess maidens from high nobility. Before their family's fall, the purification facility at Claire's home was even more impressive than this."

"...I see. But Mireille told me it's a public bath..."

Only then did Kamito realize.

...Speaking of which, she did smile mischievously before leaving.

"...~Tsk, seriously, it's that child's mischief again."

"Totally fell into her trap."

Kamito shrugged and sighed.

"...Uh, sorry. I'll go out first."

Just as Kamito was prepared to leave the bath...

"—H-Hold on first."

"...Huh?"

She firmly grabbed the towel wrapped around his waist.

"...Rinslet?"

"Slightly later, I hope you could accompany me to a certain place—"

Part 8

The «Water Elemental Shrine», the largest shrine in Laurenfrost territory, was located in a forest some distance from Winter Gulf Castle.

Unlike usual shrines built from stone, this «Water Elemental Shrine»'s outer walls were sculpted from ancient magic ice.

This type of magic ice did not melt and was much sturdier than ordinary stone.

However, no rituals had been held at this shrine ever since the incident when Judia Laurenfrost was imprisoned in ice.

Kamito had heard that a strict barrier was deployed there, forbidding everyone except the Laurenfrost family from entering.

"...The last time I visited was when I was certain we could enter the «Blade Dance»."

Rinslet touched the shrine's door to release the barrier.

"Here was where I vowed to save her. Okay, you can now enter."

The barrier did not activate when Kamito stepped inside.

Rinslet used lighting magic for illumination and walked into the depths of the shrine.

It was all quiet inside.

Cold air, chilling to the bone, was making Kamito shiver nonstop.

"She's been locked in such a lonely place all this time...?"

"Yes. It's the fourth year now."

Rinslet held a small spirit crystal in her hand.

The transparent crystal showed the image of a lovely young girl in a dress.

Emerald eyes and dazzling platinum blonde hair. Judia Laurenfrost was her sister's very image.

Inside the dark interior of the shrine, Kamito and Rinslet continued to advance.

The deeper they went, the stronger the cold.

After walking a certain distance—Rinslet finally stopped.

"...Judia, let me introduce Kamito-san to you."

She directed the magic lighting towards the darkness.

However—

"...Huh?"

Rinslet widened her eyes, exclaiming in surprise.

"...What, what is this?"

Even Kamito could not help but gasp.

At the spot where Rinslet's sister was supposed to be sealed—

Nothing was left except for shattered ice all over the floor.

Part 9

Restia was taken to a certain stone-built shrine some distance from the settlement.

A large group of princess maidens had already gathered in front of the shrine and were in the process of offering prayers.

"Is this temple the shrine of your people?"

"Yes. This place is a historic site that existed before the Empire of the humans was founded."

Rana knelt down before the temple and started to pray like the other princess maidens.

(...The «Queen of Ice Blossoms» is inside this temple?)

Staring inside the temple, Restia began to feel nervous.

The girl with mysterious powers, capable of controlling ice dragons freely. Also, for reasons unknown she had used the forest dwellers to bring Restia here.

(An existence like humans yet unlike humans at the same time...)

The Elfim princess maidens were all focused on chanting their prayers.

(...What will happen after she wakes up?)

...There was an inexplicably foreboding sense.

If the situation allowed, she wanted to escape immediately, but that was most likely impossible. The difficulty of escaping from the magically talented Elfim would be no small feat at all.

"Excuse me..."

"—Silence. The «Queen of Ice Blossoms» is appearing."

Rana's crimson eyes stared straight into the pitch-black darkness occupying the inside of the temple.

Suddenly, faint ringing sounds of a bell came from the temple's interior.

Emerging from the darkness was a young girl in ritual attire.

"...!"

Restia could not help but gasp.

The girl was roughly twelve or thirteen in age with a noble appearance and very pretty.

Her eyes were clear and emerald in color. A head of shining platinum blonde hair.

(A beautiful girl...)

"Oh exalted Queen!" "The «Queen of Ice Blossoms» has awakened...!"

The princess maidens looked up and gazed with mesmerized expressions at the girl.

Her slender legs moved slowly as she walked down the temple's stone steps. However, her emerald eyes only reflected emptiness instead of looking at the princess maidens.

"O exalted Queen, the human's knights have ravaged this forest. Please led us your assistance—"

Rana looked up and pleaded.

At this time...

—Acknowledged.

The girl's inorganic voice was heard from the depths of the forest.

—Hence, I shall—summon the great guardian hither.

"Ohoh, then—" "Zirnitra will be revived!" "Then we don't need to fear the humans any longer!" "O guardian spirit of ours, destroy all the humans!"

The sincere joy displayed by princess maidens made Restia shudder.

Perhaps the guardian spirit's revival definitely was the forest dwellers' long-sought wish.

But this fanaticism felt quite odd.

The blind devotion to this «Queen of Ice Blossoms» also seemed odd.

Even given the mysterious power of controlling ice dragons, it was still quite difficult to explain why they would worship this human girl whom they have only met for a couple days.

The «Queen of Ice Blossoms»'s hollow gaze was cast in the Kyria Mountain Range's direction.

Instantly, the ground shook violently, causing Restia to lose balance and fall.

"...What?"

"The earthquake is a warning sign of Zirnitra's awakening. See, that peak there—"

Rana spoke with a dazed expression.

Following her gaze, Restia instantly stared wide-eyed.

Near the peak of the towering Kyria Mountain Range, an astounding number of dragons were circling in the air.

The ice dragons were almost blotting out the night sky.

Where had such a great number of ice dragons been lurking—?

Just as Restia was staring in shock, a giant tear suddenly appeared out of thin air.

"...What... is that...?"

"A gate to «Cocytus», the frozen hell in «Astral Zero». That is the magic sealing away the domination ice spirit «Zirnitra» and its minions the ice dragons. That seal is now being released—"

The tear in space was gradually expanding. From that tear, a giant claw reached out.

"So that is the forest's guardian spirit, Zirnitra..."

Still kneeling on the ground, Restia was rendered speechless.

For a single claw to be so massive, how large was the entire body—
—And not only that.

"...Eh?"

Hearing a faint sound, Restia could not help but turn her head.

The «Queen of Ice Blossoms» had cast her empty gaze towards the princess maidens.

—It was seeking more divine power.

Za, zaza, za, zazaza, za—

The girls' mouths made strange noises.

Suddenly, the ground underfoot gradually froze, shrouded by the cold air surrounding the temple.

"...O exalted Queen? What are you doing—!?"

Noticing the sudden change, Rana questioned.

But her lower half was instantly covered by the crawling, black, cursed ice.

"Kyahhhh!" "O exalted Queen... Please stop, exalted Queen...!"

The princess maidens could not escape even if they tried.

One after another, their feet were ensnared by the black, cursed ice, turning them into ice sculptures.

Then the magic ice approached Restia—

"...Noooo...!"

—Just as she was about to be devoured by the cursed ice, a moment before that could happen...

"Found you, darkness spirit!"

A squadron of knights charged into the forest.

Chapter 7 - Zirnitra of Dominating Ice

Part 1

"...Wh...y..."

Faced with Judia Laurenfrost's unexpected disappearance—
Rinslet seemed totally lost as though her soul was gone.

"Where... Where has she gone...?"

In front of the shattered cursed ice, she had collapsed to her knees in shock.

"..."

Kamito's gaze fell upon the shattered fragments of cursed ice all over the floor.

The fragments were scattered in a radial shape, implying that the the cursed ice was not melted from outside but broken from within instead.

(Judia Laurenfrost broke the magic ice on her own? That's totally ridiculous—?)

Cursed ice that all the elementalists in the nation were unable to melt could not possibly have been destroyed by a human's power.

That left the possibility of the «Water Elemental Lord» releasing the cursed ice, but Iseria Seaward herself had rejected the notion.

She had said that even herself could not melt the cursed ice until she recovered her full power.

Besides, supposing Judia was released from the cursed ice, then why did she not return to her family at Winter Gulf Castle first?

(...What on earth happened here?)

Just as Kamito was stuck in deep thought—

Crash—;The temple was suddenly shaken.

"...An earthquake?"

A deep rumbling sounded from the earth. Columns of ice fell from the ceiling.

Kamito frantically shielded Rinslet who had crouched down.

"Staying here further will be dangerous, let's get out first."

"...Yes... Right."

Rinslet nodded, still half-dazed.

After they hurried out of the temple—

They were met with an unbelievable sight.

"...What... is that!?"

Dozens, no, fully a hundred—

Near the peak of the Kyria Mountain Range, countless ice dragons were circling in the air.

"So many ice dragons, where on earth did they come from..."

Rumble, rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble—!

The ground shook violently.

"The Kyria Mountain Range is shaking...!"

The long, giant mountain range. The snow accumulated on the surface of the mountains were sliding off, causing avalanches.

With a flash of lightning, a giant tear appeared in the air above the Kyria Mountain Range.

"...That thing, is it really a gate to «Astral Zero»?!"

"Impossible, how could such a massive «Gate» be possible to open in the human realm!?"

"Something's coming out...!"

The tear in space expanded. Violent blizzards began to blow.

Appearing from the tear were countless ice dragons swirling in the air as well as—

A massive claw. It enlarged the tear further.

"...!"

Frozen in space, Kamito was unable to utter a single word.

It was an immensely huge sculpture formed from blue ice.

Spreading its wings in darkness, the emperor of ice dragons.

There was a tragic sense of beauty about its appearance.

"Domination ice spirit «Zirnitura»..."

Rinslet held her breath.

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh—!

«Zirnitura» flapped its wings, shaking the atmosphere.

"...Could it be that the Elfim in the forest released the seal!?"

"Why would they do that kind of thing...!?"

"...No idea."

While muttering, Kamito recalled a certain term.

(...Queen of Ice Blossoms. The princess maiden appearing in the forest huh?)

Did the appearance of the guardian spirit have anything to do with that?

At this moment, the spirit seal on his right hand generated slight pain.

'—Kamito, that is likely a being similar to me.'

He heard Est's voice in his head.

"...A super-ancient «Spirit Weapon», is it?"

'Yes, Kamito—'

Spirit Weapons—an umbrella term used for spirits that were deployed in battle during the «Spirit War» that had occurred several thousand years ago.

During the Blade Dance, Kamito had battled Muri Alenstarl's «Valaraukar» which was also a spirit weapon. But the pressure he could feel from the domination ice spirit far surpassed that of the demon flame spirit.

From atop the peak, the domination ice spirit flapped its wings fiercely, flying into the sky.

Mixed with hail, the wind swept towards the forest, causing many shards of ice to cut open the ground.

"...Tsk, it's going to the center of the forest—"

There was impatience in Kamito's voice. The forest was Restia's possible location.

"...Rinslet, return to the castle first."

Saying that, he gripped the «Demon Slayer»'s hilt.

Seeing that, Rinslet seemed to realize Kamito's intentions.

"...Going alone will be very dangerous."

"I'm not going to fight that spirit. I'll just look for Restia and come back."

"What are you talking about? It's already so dark now, how are you going to look for the darkness spirit—"

"Once I get close, it should be clear."

Kamito shook his head and rested his gaze upon the spirit seal on his right hand.

"As long as she's still alive, there will definitely be a reaction—"

Kamito poured his divine power into the «Demon Slayer».

Instantly, the blade gave off dazzling light, illuminating the surroundings.

—Just at that moment.

Multiple dark shadows descended upon them.

"...!"

A group of ice dragons, baring their fangs and claws. Crying out shrilly, they breathed out cold air.

Kamito swiftly drew his sword to block the cold air. However, he was unable to deflect cold air that was released in a wide area. Thus his feet were frozen to the ground. As sharp claws attacked from the side, Kamito instantly pulled the blade back to deflect the claws. Then stabbing the blade into the ground and releasing divine power, he instantly shattered the ice on the ground.

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- «Freezing Arrow»!"

As soon as she spoke, the aimed arrow instantly pierced an ice dragon's head with perfect timing.

"Kamito-san, I'll cover you!"

"Thanks—"

Switching the «Demon Slayer» to a reverse grip, Kamito instantly chopped down two ice dragons that had landed behind him. At this moment, Rinslet's next wave of projectiles rained down, turning the ice dragons' giant bodies into ice sculptures.

Although he had a tough battle on the snow mountain last time, mere ice dragons were no match for Kamito to begin with. Landing one after another, the ice dragons fell to Kamito and Rinslet's combination attacks.

—That being said, the enemy numbers were quite problematic.

(We'll just have to force our way through.)

"Dance, a storm of ice summoning destruction—«Diamond Dust»!"

Suddenly, an awe-inspiring voice sounded in the forest.

Dazzling light appeared in the air before their eyes. Just as Kamito was thinking it was about to explode, a powerful blizzard started blowing with Kamito and Rinslet's location as the eye of the storm.

"...!?"

As many as dozens of ice dragons were trapped in ice within the blink of an eye, turning into immobile ice sculptures. This was high-level spirit magic as well as being combination magic requiring multiple casters of top caliber.

"Rinslet?"

"No, it was not me."

As Kamito turned to look at her, Rinslet shook her head.

"This spirit magic must be—"

"—Princess!"

Accompanied by the sonorous sounds of horses' hooves, a shout came from the darkness.

Out emerged several knights riding dappled gray horses.

The leading knight raised a torch, illuminating her face.

"You're..."

Kamito opened his eyes wide.

A girl clad in silver-white light armor. Upon closer examination, it was the head maid who had presented the food for dinner at Winter Gulf Castle.

(...So she's really a spirit knight.)

The knights swiftly dismounted and knelt down before Rinslet.

"Princess, are you unharmed?"

"Natalia, why are you here?"

"Mireille-sama said you have come here, Princess... Any injuries?"

"I am fine."

"Princess, please return to Winter Gulf Castle immediately. The castle is under attack from ice dragons."

"...What did you say!?"

Surprised, Rinslet looked in the castle's direction.

A swarm of shadows was converging towards the castle walls lit by the numerous watchfires.

"Why would this...!?"

"Thanks to the isolation barrier, they can still barely manage to endure, but Mireille-sama is not capable of commanding the «Wolf Ritters»—"

"...Hmm, then I shall return immediately."

Rinslet nodded and looked at Kamito.

"Uh, Kamito-san—"

"I..."

Whether he should head to the forest to look for Restia or return with Rinslet to Winter Gulf Castle for defense—

Just as Kamito was hesitating between the two choices...

"Kamito-sama, I have a request for you."

Natalia spoke up.

"...A request?"

Kamito repeated the words. Natalia nodded and said:

"Yes, elites of the «Wolf Ritters» have headed out to attack «Zirnitra». It is my hope that you could converge with them, Kamito-sama, and join the attack party."

"You can't be thinking of fighting that thing, are you?"

"Zirnitra is the culprit summoning the ice dragons. Unless we drive it back to Astral Zero, the castle will fall eventually. The lands of Laurenfrost would surely be ravaged as well."

Natalia spoke with an expression of determination.

"However, our current forces are insufficient for defeating a spirit of that level. Also, we have no choice but to divide our numbers for the sake of the castle's defense... We have a very good idea of your power, Kamito-sama, for you have fought alongside our princess in the «Blade Dance». Please lend us your assistance."

"Kamito-san, I am begging you too."

Rinslet faced Kamito.

"You are the only one who can oppose that spirit, Kamito-san."

"...I understand."

Kamito nodded lightly.

"I am not good at joining forces with others, but I'll try my best. Rinslet, you can focus on protecting the castle."

"Very well, leave it to me."

Kamito turned his gaze to the domination ice spirit flying towards the center of the forest.

(...If it's defeated, Restia should be safer to some extent.)

Crack—The ice sealing the ice dragons began to show fissures.

The magical resistance of dragons was nothing to sneeze at. They were probably going to break out of the ice very soon.

"Quick. Hurry before the ice dragons wake up."

"Kamito-san, I am counting on you."

Rinslet gallantly mounted one of the dappled gray horses of the knights.

"—May you be victorious."

"Yeah, don't worry."

Kamito nodded and ran towards the forest with the «Demon Slayer» in hand.

Part 2

"—Found you, darkness spirit!"

The voice of Luminaris resounded through the forest.

Her gaze was directed straight towards the girl standing in front of the temple.

Despite a change in attire, the girl before her eyes was undoubtedly that darkness spirit.

In her surroundings, Elfim princess maidens could be seen trapped in blocks of black ice.

(...An internal struggle? Or did the darkness spirit do it?)

While drawing her sacred sword and starting to charge, Luminaris was struck by doubt regarding the incomprehensible situation.

(No, now is not the time to care about such matters—)

The prey she had been chasing after was finally before her eyes.

(—With this, I can redeem my subordinates' honor.)

Kicking the ground to take a leap, she closed in on the darkness spirit all at once. In that very instant...

(...!?)

A chill down her spine forced her to halt.

Correction—She was halted.

The source of that presence—A girl standing before the temple.

Her platinum blonde hair was illuminated by the bonfire.

Empty eyes of emerald were staring at Luminaris as though observing her.

"...What business do you have?"

Shocked by the bizarre atmosphere exuded by the girl, Luminaris put on a stance with her sword.

(...A human princess maiden?)

The Elfim race was proud and xenophobic. It was hard to imagine them accepting a human girl as a princess maiden.

Za, zaza, zazazaza, za, zazaza—

Strange noises leaked out of the girl's mouth.

"...!?"

Instinctively, Luminaris jumped backwards.

Black cursed ice instantly spread, freezing the surrounding ground.

(...Spirit magic? No, this is—!)

Failing to dodge, her left foot was frozen, immobilizing her position.

"...!?"

Instantly, her entire body was struck by a powerful sense of fatigue.

(...No way, it is absorbing... my divine power...!)

Luminaris could not help but tremble. This cursed ice apparently had the ability to steal divine power.

Then that meant the princess maidens trapped in ice were also having their divine power stolen?

The black cursed ice attacked Luminaris whose foot was caught—

"—Luminaris-sama!"

At the very last moment, one of her subordinate knights blocked in front of her.

Stabbing her sword elemental waffe into the ground, she used her entire body to block the cursed ice.

"...Aisha!?"

"...Please hurry and escape...!"

Along with her elemental waffe, the knight was instantly imprisoned in cursed ice.

"...Damn it!"

Using the sacred sword to shatter the cursed ice, Luminaris made a thrust at the girl.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Swish—!

Readying her sword while in the process of running, Luminaris swung «Murgleis» sideways without the slightest hesitation.

But there was no feeling of striking anything. The girl vanished from sight like a mirage.

"...!"

"Luminaris-sama, the darkness spirit!"

She heard her subordinates call out from behind.

Swiftly turning her gaze, she found the darkness spirit running towards the depths of the forest.

"Don't let her escape, chase her!"

But before her orders could reach them—

"Uwaaaaah!" "W-What is this!?" "Kyahhhh!"

Suddenly, a powerful blizzard blew in the forest.

The view was instantly blocked. She could hear her subordinates screaming on the other side of the blizzard.

A group of ice dragons was flying above the forest.

Flying freely in the blizzard, they attacked.

"Luminaris-sama... Uwahhhhhh!"

"...Regroup! Don't lose sight of the darkness spirit!"

While chopping down the attacking ice dragons, Luminaris hollered.

But her voice was drowned out by the blizzard's rumbling winds.

"Damn it, I cannot believe this would happen, by this point..."

Luminaris's voice trembled.

(...I will not let you escape!)

Luminaris raised her drawn sacred sword overhead.

Her beautiful blonde hair stood up amidst the howling gales.

"Ancient guardian of the Holy Kingdom—Thou art «Murgleis», the sacred sword defending the country!"

She spoke the words of releasing.

Pouring in divine power beyond the limit, this was a «Waffe Release» with the intention of causing the elemental waffe to go out of control. Giving off powerful light, «Murgleis» instantly exploded.

Accompanied by a blinding flash of light, sacred flames melted the randomly flying pieces of ice, instantly clearing up the field of view—!

The burning sacred flames instantly incinerated the surrounding trees. Circling above, the ice dragons also fell one after another with painful roars.

"Huff, huff, huff..."

The sacred sword lost its light. Stabbing it into the ground, Luminaris observed the surroundings. There were no signs of that princess maiden. Luminaris decided she must settle the score with that girl assuming she was still in the area.

Her subordinates, the «Sacred Spirit Knights», were safe and sound because «Murgleis»'s sacred flames would absolutely not burn anyone protected by spirits with the holy attribute.

Also—

(—The darkness spirit?)

The sacred flames of «Murgleis» were supposed to cause astounding pain for darkness spirits. Even if she evaded burns from the sacred flames, the secondary effect of sacred light should be enough to stop her from moving.

But Luminaris's hopes were soon dashed.

"Luminaris-sama, look over there—!"

Hearing her subordinate's voice, she shifted her gaze to see the figure of the darkness spirit running through the forest.

"...What!?"

Luminaris could not help but exclaim.

(—To think the sacred light of «Murgleis» had no effect on a minion of darkness?)

—At this kind of distance, it was supposed to cause critical injuries to the darkness spirit.

Luminaris gripped the sacred sword's hilt tightly.

"—Chase her down. Everyone still able to move, follow me. The rest should focus on healing your wounds."

Saying that, she chased after the darkness spirit that was disappearing into the forest.

The darkness spirit ran through the forest with stumbling steps.

Compared to during the «Blade Dance», she seemed much weaker than before.

(...Is she really that darkness spirit?)

At the very least, that darkness spirit was a high-level spirit capable of fighting Luminaris on equal terms.

She was able to use powerful spirit magic of the darkness attribute. During the «Blade Dance», she had paired up with Nepenthes Lore to defeat numerous teams.

(But her current self? No different from a weak prey—)

—Suddenly.

"...!?"

Feeling a strong presence, Luminaris stopped.

On the ground was a giant shadow from something covering the night sky.

Looking up—

She saw a super large ice dragon, formed from blue ice, flying the air, looking down at the world below.

"...A spirit...is it!?"

Luminaris murmured in surprise. The knights under her command all stood rooted to the spot, speechless.

An elemental of her level would be able to deduce a spirit's level by presence alone.

That thing was undoubtedly a spirit of the highest rank, Archdemon class.

A monster that required the decisive deployment of a major power's knights in order to vanquish.

ROAR, ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR—!

The super large spirit's roars caused the forest's trees to shake intensely.

As though responding to its sound, the ice dragons circling nearby all roared, summoning fierce blizzards.

"Is that something like the king of ice dragons—?"

Just as she was murmuring to herself, acute murderous intent appeared behind her back.

"—Accursed humans!"

An arrow flew past her neck with the sound of slicing wind.

Then immediately, several more arrows were shot from the trees.

"—O «Sacred Shield» of protection!"

Luminaris instantly chanted spirit magic to deploy a defensive barrier of light.

"Stay out of my way, Elfim. Do you wish to seek death?"

The archer was an Elfim living in the forest. Although he was of no consequence, getting in the way of the darkness spirit's pursuit was annoying.

"Foolish human, «Zirnitra» will destroy you!"

Readying his bow and arrow, the youth yelled.

As though responding to his voice, which was of course, actually impossible—

The ice dragon king dominating the sky blew towards the forest on the ground.

The powerful cold air, covering a large area, instantly swallowed the forest dweller's settlement.

"...Th-The village!" "Zirnitra-sama!?"

Elfim screams were heard one after another.

«Zirnitra» flapped its wings and slowly descended towards the ground.

The ground shook as a result. The giant tail of ice swept mercilessly through the forest, felling trees.

"Zirnitra-sama, please calm your wrath!" "This forest is your domain—" "Your enemies are the humans, not the forest!"

Tragic screams came one after another.

—However, their pleas were easily drowned out by the sounds of trees breaking.

"...Naturally."

Luminaris murmured with agitation.

"How could the likes of you possibly control a spirit of that level?"

The reason why a large number of «Strategic-class Militarized Spirits» were sealed and scrapped was because even the military of major powers could not guarantee 100% stability of control.

Suddenly feeling a sense of dissonance, she frowned.

(...These people, are they actually completely ignorant of this?)

No, impossible.

The Elfim was a race far closer to spirits than to humans. It was hard to imagine them summoning an Archdemon-class spirit without preparing control methods beforehand.

Then that meant—

(—Powerful mind control, huh.)

Feeling an astounding presence, Luminaris turned around.

The human princess maiden who had disappeared earlier was there.

Behind the girl were Elfim boys and girls following her.

All of them staring lifelessly at Luminaris.

(...All of the Elfim inhabiting this settlement are under mind control?)

However, human elementalists could not possibly cast mind control on the Elfin who had magic resistance to begin with, and on so many people simultaneously.

"...Who are you? Are you the one who summoned that spirit?"

Pointing the sacred sword at her, Luminaris asked.

She was no mere princess maiden.

But she did not seem to be a humanoid high-level spirit like that darkness spirit.

...It was something even more terrifying.

Za, zazaza, za, zazazazaza, za—

Strange noises were coming from the princess maiden's mouth.

Instantly, the children behind her were instantly trapped in black cursed ice.

The girl's hair gave off faint light as the divine power within her expanded all at once.

"Luminaris-sama, this is..."

A knight subordinate gasped.

"—Indeed, a veritable monster."

This was what intuition told Luminaris.

This thing before her eyes was far more dangerous than the Archdemon-class spirit in the air above.

The girl reached towards space and made noises as though summoning the giant spirit.

Za, zazaza, za, zazazazaza—la, lalala, la, dolulululu—

Suddenly, the girl's body hovered lightly to approach the spirit.

Her fingers touched the spirit's chest—

(What...!?)

With that, the girl's body was sucked in, buried inside the blue ice.

"...Unbelievable, she merged with the spirit!?"

Witnessing an incredible sight, Luminaris could hardly conceal her surprise.

Part 3

"The west side's barrier is broken, send troops over immediately!" "Fear not, just strike them down!" "Princess maidens go strengthen the barrier, holy magic users go heal the injured!"

Faced with the fierce onslaught of countless ice dragons, Winter Gulf Castle was trying its best to maintain the defensive line.

As a secure stronghold and border defense center of Ordesia, Winter Gulf Castle could not fall that easily. Nevertheless, if these fierce attacks continued at this rate, the isolation barrier protecting the castle was going to reach its limits sooner or later.

"Calm down. Ice dragons are a type of dragon with excellent flying abilities. Ordinary weapons cannot pierce dragon scales but the wings are not that resilient. Aim for the wings—"

Dressed as a maid, Milla Bassett was patrolling the surroundings of the castle walls, directing the ordinary soldiers manning the catapults. Despite losing the contracted spirit in her Demon Sealing Eye, she used to be an elite knight serving under the Principality of Rossvale's «Rupture Division» after all. Her tactical command skills were quite superb.

"...Milla, are things okay?"

"Mireille-sama, do not come out here. Hurry and return to the castle—"

"...Yes, yes. But I'm worried about you, Milla..."

Mireille's emerald eyes harbored unease.

She only knew Milla in her maid phase and knew nothing about the Milla Bassett who was born as a military weapon and belonged to the knights serving the Principality of Rossvale.

Milla gently stroked Mireille's head.

"...I am fine. Thank you."

Normally expressionless, she smiled faintly.

At this time, cheering came from the plaza at the foot of the castle walls.

Milla looked back to see Rinslet exiting the castle gates. Natalia of the «Wolf Ritters» had brought Rinslet back.

"Onee-sama!"

Mireille could not help but smile.

"Ohoh, Princess!" "The princess has returned!" "Thank goodness she is safe and sound..."

"Everyone, my apologies for making you wait."

Having entered the castle from an underground passage, Rinslet gave encouragement to the wounded soldiers while climbing the steps leading to the top of the castle walls.

Natalia hastily followed behind her.

"Princess, the castle walls are very dangerous. You should at least command from the inside—"

"No, I shall command from here. Taking the lead on the battlefield's frontlines is part of my obligations as both an Ordesian noble and an elemental. Furthermore—"

Standing openly on the castle walls, Rinslet raised her bow elemental waffe.

Firing numerous arrows into the air, she shot down ice dragons that were flying in the sky.

"I enjoy being the center of attention."

With a fearless smile, she nocked her next arrow.

"...Sigh, that is the kind of person who the princess is."

Natalia laughed wryly and shrugged.

"We cannot lose either!" "Wow, the princess is watching!"

Rinslet's heroic figure standing on the castle walls seemed to be rousing the soldiers' morale inside the castle.

Set up on the castle walls, the catapults and ballistae fired in succession upon the ice dragons that were frozen and fallen on the ground.

"...By the way, the numbers are too great."

"Yes. Indeed. Unless the ice dragon king «Zirnitra» is defeated—"

While using a spear elemental waffe to pierce an ice dragon's wing, Natalia concurred.

Rinslet directed her gaze towards the center of the forest in the distance.

Zirnitra was currently rampaging at the «Forest of Ice Blossoms», blowing trees down.

(To think that the guardian spirit of Laurenfrost would be destroying the forest...)

Furthermore—

(Judia...)

She was concerned about her younger sister's sudden disappearance.

(...Where on earth has she gone?)

"...Princess!"

Natalia yelled acutely as an ice dragon penetrated the barrier and collided towards the castle walls.

Their foothold collapsing, a large amount of rubble was falling onto the plaza below. The screams of soldiers were heard.

"...! The barrier has been..."

"Winter Gulf Castle's barrier makes use of the leylines in the «Forest of Ice Blossoms». Most likely, «Zirnitra»'s revival has disrupted the leylines in the area, causing the barrier to lose its original power."

Damaging the castle walls, the ice dragon attacked Rinslet.

"Princess—"

At the last moment, Natalia blocked in front, using her spear to defend against this strike.

Instantly, the spear elemental waffe shattered into particles of ice. She had apparently depleted a great amount of divine power through sustained combat against the ice dragons, causing her contracted spirit's power to reach a limit. Natalia's spirit—a small wolf very similar to Fenrir—dissipated into particles of light and disappeared.

"...!"

The ice dragon opened its jaws, preparing to use dragon's breath.

"...Not so fast!"

Rinslet instantly nocked three arrows and fired them simultaneously. Two struck the wings while one hit the interior of the mouth. Losing control, the breath exploded, causing the ice dragon to fall down the castle wall.

"Let the soldiers retreat to the castle. I will hold the ice dragons off from here."

Since the barrier was broken, ordinary soldiers who were not elementalists would have a tough time fighting dragons.

Swiftly issuing orders to Milla Bassett who was in charge of commanding the west side, Rinslet then hurried over to Natalia who had collapsed on the ground.

"Princess... A thousand... apologies..."

"Natalia, you should go back inside the castle walls too."

"But—"

"Don't worry. I shall take care of defense here on my own."

Rinslet stood up and readied five arrows at the same time.

She shot them simultaneously. The freezing arrows struck down multiple ice dragons at the same time.

"Princess, when exactly did you acquire such power..."

Looking up, Natalia was staring wide-eyed.

As «Team Scarlet»'s archer, having obtained victory throughout the harsh trials of the «Blade Dance», Rinslet's current power level was enough to rival spirit knights on active duty.

Furthermore, this was the territory passed down generations of the Laurenfrost family, the place best suited to bringing out the full power of the local spirit —But that was not all.

Currently, her body was also harboring another power that she had never possessed before.

(...What is this feeling—)

Opposite to the divine power flowing in her body, unknown divine power.

Every time she used the power of spirits, that power would gradually strengthen.

It was the power she had felt during the kiss with Kamito in the ice cave at the Kyria Mountain Range.

Her heart kept beating faster while her emotions heightened more and more.

"Go forth and blow, raging storm of ice—«Icicle Storm»!"

Using high-level spirit magic released through her elemental waffe, she blew away all of the ice dragons swarming towards the castle walls.

"Huff, huff, huff... Finally, I wiped out half of them..."

Rinslet kept panting. Despite striking down the majority of them, the numbers in the air were still increasing. The temporarily frozen ice dragons were also going to break out of the ice eventually.

"This castle cannot... fall yet."

Suddenly, the ice dragons' fierce assault stopped all at once.

"...Huh?"

Rinslet could not help but exclaim.

It was a very bizarre sight.

As many as hundreds of ice dragons—

...were facing the same direction, completely motionless in the air.

"...What... happened...?"

The ice dragons' gazes were directed towards Zirnitra that was flying through the sky.

ROOOOOOOAAAAAR!

Zirnitra roared towards the sky.

The atmosphere shook as a result. Then the howling blizzard in the «Forest of Ice Blossoms» was instantly blown away.

In the next instant...

"—Princess, look!"

Natalia pointed at the sky and called out.

The ice dragons in the air surrounding the castle were all flying towards Zirnitra.

"..."

A strange silence arrived.

The soldiers in the castle were all exchanging glances with puzzled expressions on their faces.

"What on earth happened..."

Just as Rinslet was murmuring to herself, a sharp pain suddenly appeared on her left hand.

'—t... Rins... let...!'

"Iseria-sama!?"

'—Listen to me... I have... something, I must, tell you.'

Part 4

—Meanwhile, a giant demon bird was flying in the air above the Kyria Mountain Range.

"Ellis, I never knew your spirit could carry two people at once..."

"Hmm, it is normally not possible, but right now, I am in excellent shape."

This was Ellis's demon wind spirit «Simorgh».

The enlarged Simorgh was flying casually over the Kyria Mountain Range after the blizzard subsided.

Although they were unsure why the blizzard over the mountains had suddenly stopped, the situation at the Laurenfrost forest at the foot of the mountain left them with no attention to spare for the blizzard issue.

"Look, dragons are gathering in the forest."

Hugging the demon bird's wing tightly, Claire pointed below and said.

"That's—"

The bizarre scenery caused Ellis to hold her breath.

Countless dragons were circling in the air above the «Forest of Ice Blossoms».

A blizzard was blowing in the air above the forest. A mass of ice could be seen faintly in the center of the blizzard, but it was hard to get a grasp on its full appearance due to the darkness of nighttime.

"...What on earth is happening at that forest?"

"Ellis, lower the altitude. We might be able to see clearly if we get closer."

"I want to do that too, but getting closer will be dangerous. We will be in trouble if we get caught up in a blizzard."

After crossing the mountaintop, the demon wind spirit's flying had shown large-scale instabilities.

"Uwahhhh!"

Almost falling off, Claire grabbed the base part of the wing.

"...We cannot keep flying anymore. Let us land first."

"...No helping it. There is a village over there."

The demon wind spirit cooed and landed at a small village at the foot of the mountain.

While landing, the two girls jumped off from Simorgh's wings.

The village was instantly in a commotion.

"W-What people are you!"

Holding torches, the villagers hurried over.

The flames illuminated the faces of Claire and the others.

"...Eeek, th-this frightening demon bird!"

Seeing Simorgh appearing in the darkness, the villagers screamed and fell on their bottoms.

"How rude. Simorgh's feelings will be hurt."

Ellis said with displeasure.

"Do not mind them, Simorgh. Thank you."

"Yeah, you worked hard."

Ellis gently caressed «Simorgh»'s head and the demon bird cooed, transforming into its elemental waffe form.

"C-Could you two be noble ladies?"

At this moment, an old villager asked in trepidation.

"We are students from Areishia Spirit Academy. What on earth happened to this forest?"

"The forest dwellers did it. Those people revived «Zirnitra»!"

"...Forest dwellers?"

Ellis frowned.

"It's a name for the Elfim who live in the Forest of Ice Blossoms. I heard Rinslet mention it before. Anyway, what's this about «Zirnitra»? I remember it being the Laurenfrost guardian spirit, sealed in the ancient past, right?"

As an honors student, Claire roughly knew the legends circulating in various lands.

The old man turned his gaze to the center of the forest where the blizzard was howling.

"There is a giant ice dragon at the center of the blizzard. That's «Zirnitra». The forest dwellers awakened that spirit in an attempt to regain control over these lands."

"But the spirit seems to be destroying the forest..."

Ellis calmly pointed out. Supposing the Elfim had revived the ancient spirit, then why was it destroying the forest they lived in?

"It's gone berserk. There's no way that kind of spirit can be controlled so easily."

Claire murmured.

At this time, a large scream was heard in the village square.

Strong winds toppled the watchfires, turning the surroundings pitch dark.

"—Come, Scarlet!"

Claire snapped her fingers, summoning the fiery hellcat in the air.

The flames lit up the surroundings, showing shadows that had gathered on the square.

Ice dragons with flashing eyes of crimson.

"...Two, three... A total of six huh..."

"A bit troublesome—"

Licking her lips, Claire murmured. The scales of dragons possessed excellent magic resistance. For Claire and Ellis who were contracted to spirits belonging to the traditional five major elements, dragons were challenging enemies.

(And clearly we have to hurry and find Kamito...)

Claire knew Kamito's strength quite well.

Mere ice dragons were no match for Kamito no matter how numerous.

...But that did not mean she would not worry.

(...Seriously, to think he's making me worried, I'll have to teach him a lesson later!)

Claire turned Scarlet into her elemental waffe «Flametongue».

"Ellis, I'll take care of them. You haven't fully recovered, right?"

"Hmph, no need to worry."

Standing back to back with Claire, Ellis readied «Ray Hawk».

—Just at that moment...

"Wait, that's..."

"...Hmm?"

Just as Ellis was about to release wind blades, Claire stopped her.

An ice dragon had pinned a girl to the ground, trying to feed.

"...Ah, sob... sob sob...!"

She was clearly wearing clothing different from the villagers, a leaf-green garment.

It was the traditional clothing of the Elfim race.

"Why is one of the Elfim appearing in a human village—"

"...Save... me..."

Under the ice dragon's foot, the girl moaned in pain.

The instant she made eye contact with the girl, Claire gasped.

Illuminated by the light of fire, the girl's face seemed familiar.

"No way... Y-You are!?"

Part 5

(...Damn it, what the heck is going on!?)

Sharp frozen branches sliced open Kamito's clothes while he was running through the forest.

The «Forest of Ice Blossoms» was too harsh an environment for humans, totally impossible to step into.

The Elfim's barrier had already vanished and no longer interfered with pathfinding. But the closer to «Zirnitra», the stronger the blizzard.

Kamito stared at the giant body that was faintly visible on the other side of the blizzard.

(...So that's the guardian spirit of Laurenfrost, huh.)

However, given the way it was destroying the surrounding forest, it did not look like a guardian spirit no matter what.

Instead, it looked like it had a grudge against the forest.

With a flash of light, the forest was instantly dyed white under the night sky.

Someone had apparently started engaging «Zirnitra» in battle.

Was it the «Wolf Ritters» who had gone ahead first, or—

(—the sacred sword of Luminaris, right?)

Kamito increased his running speed further.

He used the «Demon Slayer» to chop away all branches blocking his way.

Finally, a wide open space appeared before him.

Then—

"...!"

Seeing the bizarre scene, Kamito was rendered speechless.

On the ground were the bodies of countless dragons, piled into mountains. A number of giant ice pillars were standing upright on the ground. The Elfim settlement was wrecked beyond recognition.

"Were they wiped out by the spirit they summoned themselves...?"

Kamito poured divine power into Est, instantly lighting the surroundings with powerful light.

In a corner of his view, Kamito discovered a girl collapsed on the ground.

Dressed in ritual attire, a girl with jade-green hair—one of the Elfim.

"Hey, are you alright!?"

Kamito frantically rushed over and picked up the girl in his arms.

...She was still breathing. Placing his hand on her chest, he injected divine power to apply a shock, causing the girl to recover her breath.

"...Who, is it...?"

The girl opened her eyes slightly, panting painfully.

...It looked like her life was not in any danger for now. Kamito secretly breathed a sigh of relief.

"...You're a... human...?"

"Yeah, that's right."

Kamito nodded.

"...Tell me. What happened here exactly?"

Hearing Kamito's question, the princess maiden moved her trembling lips.

"The «Queen of Ice Blossoms»... summoned, forest's guardian spirit..."

"...Queen... A human princess maiden?"

The girl nodded slightly in response to Kamito's question.

"That queen failed to control the spirit?"

"...No..."

This time, she shook her head weakly.

"She... No, it, from the start, was planning, to use Zirnitra..."

"What do you mean?"

"...It... merged with Zirnitra."

"Merged with a spirit?"

Kamito asked, unsure of the meaning.

Perhaps the girl was talking nonsense due to a hazy consciousness.

—At this moment, the blowing blizzard stopped.

Kamito looked up at the sky in surprise. Then...

"...What, that's...?"

He groaned in his throat.

The flying Zirnitra was catching and eating all of the ice dragons in the surroundings.

Catching the circling ice dragons one after another, Zirnitra ate them without holding back at all.

Every time it ate an ice dragon, the domination ice spirit's giant body would expand further.

Crack, crack—Accompanied by loud noises of rupturing, ice grew out of its back.

Kamito's forehead was breaking out in cold sweat. Indeed, there were spirits that would feed on creatures in the human realm to replenish their divine power, but this thing—

(...isn't absorbing divine power.)

Instead, it was absorbing the ice dragons, assimilating them completely.

Even demon spirits could not do that.

This was no longer a spirit but just a monster.

"...Please... you..."

The girl touched Kamito's face with her fingers.

Her crimson eyes reflected the pain in her heart.

"Please, let Zirnitra rest in peace..."

"...Yeah, I got it."

Even without needing her to beg, that sort of thing was not supposed to exist in this world.

Kamito nodded and moved the girl to a spot shaded by fallen trees.

At this time, he suddenly remembered and asked:

"Can I ask a final question?"

"...?"

"Uh—Did you ever see a girl?"

"...A... girl...?"

"Yeah, wearing a black one-piece dress... A very pretty girl."

The princess maiden widened her eyes suddenly.

"...You saw her?"

She nodded.

"That girl was definitely here. I was responsible for taking care of her."

"...! Then where is she now?"

"...Not... sure..."

The girl lowered her eyes and shook her head.

"...Probably, escaped into the forest."

"I see."

Kamito stood up.

He really wanted to chase after Restia.

But currently—

(...I have to defeat that monster first.)

He glared at the giant spirit that kept merging with a large number of ice dragons.

Part 6

"...What exactly happened there!?"

Rinslet was riding Fenrir, passing through the forest where trees have fallen left and right.

All the soldiers were left in the castle while she made her way towards the deepest part of the forest.

The ice dragons that had attacked Winter Gulf Castle were now gathered around «Zirnitra», offering themselves to be eaten. Having merged with a

large number of ice dragons, «Zirnitra» no longer resembled its original form. Its entire body being eaten away, bulging with pillars of black ice that resembled stakes.

"That's the legendary guardian spirit of Laurenfrost?"

'Wrong. That is no longer something that could be classified as a spirit—it has been replaced.'

Iseria's voice resounded in Rinslet's mind.

"What do you mean?"

'That is a sin that my past self committed—Iseria Seaward's sin.'

Then she told the whole story.

The truth of that day, buried in the memories of the insane «Water Elemental Lord».

Part 7

"O sacred sword that vanquisheth evil, thou shalt turn the enemy into ash—«Murgleis»!"

Releasing silver-white light, the blade tore through darkness to pierce «Zirnitra»'s head.

—But that was all. Having melded with ice dragons, turning into a strange block of ice, the monster quickly regenerated.

"...Huff, huff... This monster!"

Luminaris was kneeling on the ground, panting. She had vanquished Archdemon-class spirits before, but that was achieved while leading knights under her command.

(Also, this thing no longer counts as a spirit...!)

Clang—Clatter clatter!

Peeling off from Zirnitra's body, ice fell on the ground, causing noise and the scattering of dust.

"...!"

Luminaris instantly went pale in the face.

There were reasons why she could not leave this place which was under the falling ice.

Because of her subordinates from the «Sacred Spirit Knights», trapped in cursed ice.

...They should still be alive, but taking them all away was impossible. At this rate, they were going to get caught up in «Zirnitra»'s attacks eventually, or die from the cursed ice when completely drained of divine power.

(Before that happens, this monster must be exterminated...!)

But after sustained combat against ice dragons and one instance of waffe release, Luminaris had almost depleted all her divine power. Driving her current self was nothing but stalwart willpower.

No reinforcements. Fighting here, she was the last person remaining. The three «Wolf Ritters» sent from Winter Gulf were already devoured by the cursed ice after depleting their strength.

(...Oh well, at least it worked in buying some time.)

Staring at the pitch-black sky, Luminaris adjusted her breathing.

At this time, Zirnitra underwent changes in the air.

Unable to support its body weight after excessive expansion, it started to free fall.

Crash!

The landing impact shook the ground.

The wind pressure swept away the trees in its surroundings. The impact created a small crater on the ground.

"...Guh—"

Luminaris hastily released «Shield» magic to protect her frozen subordinates.

After landing on the ground, Zirnitra had released cold air from its giant body, freezing the surrounding land,, causing the trees in the «Forest of Ice Blossoms» to wilt gradually.

"It has already become a monster that only knows to devour everything huh..."

Standing up unsteadily, she readied «Murgleis» again.

(But while it has fallen on the ground, there are still chances for victory—)

But soon, she realized that this notion of hers was too naive.

Suddenly, the ground swelled as countless ice blades rose up in the surroundings.

Assimilating the «Forest of Ice Blossoms», Zirnitra was turning the very ground itself into blades of ice.

Caught unprepared, Luminaris reacted an instant too slow.

"Guh, ahhhhhh—!"

Pierced all over her body by the sharp blades of cursed ice, she screamed from her throat.

(...Is this... the end...?)

A tear slid down Luminaris's cheek. Ever since she suffered defeat three years ago at the hands of that «Strongest Blade Dancer», she had vowed to never shed another tear again.

(...Sor...ry...)

Her final thoughts were with the subordinates who had followed her faithfully all along.

Her fingers had no more strength. The sacred sword fell from her hand to the ground.

The cursed ice invaded up to throat level. Just as Luminaris sighed in despair, at that moment...

"—Don't give up. Your past self never gave up back when you were fighting her."

(...?)

A flash of white light. The cursed ice covering her entire body shattered with a crisp sound.

Thrown into the air, she was caught by a pair of powerful arms.

"—You look like you're struggling, Miss Paladin."

"...You... are...!"

«Team Scarlet»'s male elemental.

—Kazehaya Kamito.

Chapter 8 - Queen of Ice Blossoms

Part 1

"...Kazehaya, Kami, to... Why are you here?"

Held in Kamito's arms, Luminaris panted while speaking.

"Right back at you. What are the Holy Kingdom's knights doing in Laurenfrost?"

"...That... is—"

Luminaris bit her lip hard. Kamito shrugged and put her down.

"Well whatever. I'll ask about your purpose later. Let's find a way to take care of that monster first."

Kamito glared at «Zirnitra» which was gradually assimilating with the «Forest of Ice Blossoms».

Perhaps due to absorbing the divine power from the spirits in the forest, the giant body made from cursed ice was giving off a strange light against the darkness of the night.

"—So, what is up with that monster?"

"If you ask me, who can I ask in turn? Spirits do not mutate like that at all—"

After applying «Healing» magic to herself, Luminaris suppressed a groan and stood up.

"Don't force yourself. You're all covered with wounds already."

"Shut up. Do not underestimate a Holy Kingdom's knight."

Luminaris replied sharply then gripped «Murgleis» properly again.

Seeing that, Kamito shrugged.

"I've still got lots to talk to you about. Like all the things you did to my friends, but oh well, let's put that aside for now. How about we join forces right now?"

"...What are you scheming?"

Luminaris's eyes of sapphire showed wariness as they glared at Kamito.

"I simply want a helping hand. It'd be tough if I had to handle that monster on my own. Also, I know your abilities very well, absolutely flawless in terms of combat."

"Stop acting familiar, male elementalist."

"But we are familiar. At least we have crossed blades for real before—"

"What did you say?"

Mid-sentence, Kamito realized he had misspoken and hastily stopped himself.

(...Come to think of it, this girl doesn't know my true identity.)

"I do not remember fighting you before. During the final round, the one I engaged in combat was the user of the hellcat spirit."

The suspicions in her eyes, glaring at Kamito, became deeper and deeper.

"W-Well, let's forget about the trivial stuff for now. Judging by the situation, this isn't the time for verbal arguments—"

Zirnitra's giant body squirmed and gave off powerful light.

"...Tsk!"

Simultaneously, the two of them jumped apart.

Instantly, countless ice blades rushed out of the ground, tearing through the darkness.

The two had barely dodged it, but—

"...! Alda!"

Luminaris cried out. The rushing flow of ice blades on the ground was going to attack her subordinates that were trapped in cursed ice.

Luminaris's sword made a slight noise. A torrent of sacred flames covered the ice blades, vaporizing them.

But the ice blades were overwhelming in quantity. Quite a few of them evaded destruction.

"No good—!"

"Absolute Blade Arts - Third Form, Shadowmoon Waltz!"

Instantly with an explosive kick against the ground, Kamito performed the anti-army technique of the Absolute Blade Arts.

Slicing through darkness, the white blade's furious dance shattered the cursed ice blades completely.

"...What!?"

Luminaris was rendered speechless.

She had also reacted to the ice, but she was definitely incapable of performing the same kind of move.

(...That movement just now, what was it?)

After witnessing Kamito's sword skills for the first time in person, Luminaris could not help but find herself at a loss for words.

These were superb sword skills on par with the Ren Ashbell, the «Strongest Blade Dancer» three years ago.

...She was forced to admit to an overwhelming difference in strength.

Slicing through all the ice blades within the blink of an eye, Kamito stabbed the «Demon Slayer» into the ground and turned to face Luminaris.

"You too have reasons why you can't retreat from here, right?"

He shrugged and looked at the girls of the «Sacred Spirit Knights», imprisoned in cursed ice.

"In that case, now is the time for you to throw that knight's pride or whatever it's called to the dogs."

"But..."

Luminaris bit her lip hard and glared squarely at Kamito.

Then—

"...Just once."

"Hmm?"

"—Just once, I shall ally with you!"

"Yeah. That's good enough."

Kamito nodded and poured divine power into the «Demon Slayer».

"Follow me, Luminaris. Let's take care of that thing in one go by overwhelming its regeneration speed."

"Hmph, when I said I was allying with you, I never allowed you to command me—Kazehaya Kamito!"

The two of them kicked the ground at the same time.

"—We're up, Est!" "O «Murgleis», grant sacred protection to thy knight!"

The two sacred swords ripped through the darkness.

Zirnitra roared, shooting cursed ice blades from the ground in a radial pattern.

"That move's not gonna work!"

Kamito kicked the ground to speed up and instantly raced past Luminaris to serve as the vanguard.,

"Absolute Blade Arts - Third Form, Shadowmoon Waltz!"

A triple flash with god-like speed, slicing the ice blades and blowing them away. Using that momentum, Kamito rushed into the howling blizzard to engage «Zirnitra»'s bloated body in melee combat.

"O sacred sword that vanquisheth evil, thou shalt turn the enemy into ash—!"

Shouting, Luminaris rushed forward and stabbed her sword towards a mass of ice.

With the sound of shattering, a hole opened up in the ice.

But very soon, new ice rose up to fill up the pierced location.

"Damn it—"

"Ordinary attacks are useless. Coordinate your timing with me!"

"...Like I said, stop ordering me around!"

Countless pillars of ice were growing out of Zirnitra's entire body, then shot outwards.

Faced with suppressive fire from all directions shot at point blank range, it was totally impossible to evade.

(...Fine, I'll just have to retaliate an eye for an eye!)

Kamito went up decisively. Contracted to Est, Kamito possessed «Steel's Protection» which enhanced the body's durability. This allowed him some leeway to conduct self-sacrificing attacks.

"Absolute Blade Arts - First Form, Purple Lightning!"

Sharp pillars of ice shot at Kamito.

Blood splattered from all over his body, but Kamito continued advancing, unfazed.

Smashing ice with sword strikes of god-like speed, he pummeled the monster's body to produce a cobweb-like network of cracks.

"Not done yet—"

Maintaining a thrusting posture, Kamito infused the «Demon Slayer» with a large amount of divine power to cause an explosion. Suppose he destroyed the interior of the body directly rather than using slicing attacks, he should be able to slow down the regeneration speed. However—

'—No good, Kamito!'

(...Eh?)

He heard Est's voice in his mind. Suddenly, he was struck by a sense of powerlessness in his limbs.

The ice where the sword was stabbed suddenly gave off powerful light.

(...It's absorbing my divine power!?)

'...Kami... to...'

Kamito instantly tried to draw out the sword, but—

"...!"

The cursed ice had frozen the sacred sword's blade, trying to pull it in.

'—Kamito, please let go of me!'

"Like hell anyone's gonna do that!"

Using willpower alone to suppress the sense of exhaustion, Kamito yelled loudly.

(...Restia, lend me the power you left behind!)

The seal of darkness branded on Kamito's right hand gave off ominous light.

The silver-white blade with dazzling radiance gradually took on a coating of darkness.

"Go forth and pierce, all-annihilating demon lightning of punishment—«Vorpall Blast»!"

The «Demon's Sword»—Terminus Est Zwei.

Imbued with powers of darkness, the sacred sword released jet-black lightning.

The ensnaring cursed ice was instantly vaporized. Kamito took this opportunity to withdraw the blade and distance himself all at once.

Just at this moment...

At the lower abdomen of this giant mass of magical ice, countless «Ice Dragon» heads sprouted.

These were the remains of the ice dragons absorbed by «Zirnitra».

(...No way!?)

The ice dragons all widened their jaws together and spewed out an astounding amount of blizzard breath.

Kamito hastily readied the «Demon's Sword» to use as a shield. But having had his divine power sucked out just now, he was unable to bring out power sufficient to melt the blizzard.

Just before he was about to be attacked by the blizzard and frozen all over—

"—O «Sacred Shield» of protection!"

Luminaris chanted protective magic to neutralize the blizzard.

"...Sorry, thanks for saving me."

Kamito fell to his knees, panting.

Torn by ice blades, his uniform was gradually dyed the color of blood.

"Looks like melee weapon attacks are useless."

Luminaris groaned.

"But we don't have enough firepower to burn the thing up using ranged attacks—"

Right, without overwhelming power to destroy it in one go, Zirnitra would probably become capable of infinite regeneration after merging with the «Forest of Ice Blossoms».

But they did not have an attack capable to annihilating the mass of something so gigantic—

(...If Rubia's «Laevateinn» could be used here, it'd be a piece of cake.)

'—Kamito, please listen to me.'

"...Est?"

Hearing her, Kamito rested his gaze upon the «Demon's Sword» in his hand.

'The core for maintaining that spirit weapon should be present somewhere.'

"...Core?"

'Yes, this monster absorbs divine power endlessly from the surroundings. That kind of thing will rapidly collapse on its own. But it is able to stay materialized all this time because—'

"...I see. In other words, there's a core somewhere that's enough to sustain it?"

Hearing Kamito's mutterings, Luminaris reacted.

"—Core huh? I see now. I have some idea."

"...Some idea, really?"

"Yes. A human princess maiden at the Elfim settlement. I personally saw that girl merge with «Zirnitra». Most likely, that girl is the—"

"A human princess maiden..."

Kamito was struck with surprise.

...Indeed, the Elfim girl had mentioned it too.

Something about the «Queen of Ice Blossoms» merging with «Zirnitra».

At the time, he had been skeptical about the notion of a human merging with a spirit—

"As long as the core is targeted, there's a way to stop that monster huh—"

Kamito looked towards the monster, restless in the darkness.

Zu... Zuzuzu... Zuzuzu...!

The traces of damage inflicted by Kamito and Luminaris had already started to regenerate. With ice dragon heads sprouting all over, the massive body was currently still devouring the land slowly. At this rate, it could swallow the entire forest, turning into a monster that even an army would be unable to stop.

"...Wanna try a gamble?"

Reaching for the «Demon's Sword» that was exuding miasma of darkness, Kamito said:

"Luminaris, when I give the signal, release your strongest move as much as you can."

"Like I said, stop ordering me—"

"—I'm begging you. Most likely, this move can only be used once."

"..."

Faced with Kamito's serious voice, Luminaris fell silent.

"...Understood. You shall decide the timing."

"Yeah, just leave it to me—"

Holding the «Demon's Sword», Kamito rushed towards the howling blizzard.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Kicking the ground hard, he instantly closed in, then—

"Absolute Blade Arts - First Form, Purple Lightning!"

A strike with god-like speed left a large crack on the ice.

"—Luminaris, here you go!"

"Yes—"

Answering Kamito's cries, Luminaris raised the sacred sword high.

"Ancient guardian of the Holy Kingdom—Thou art «Murgleis», the sacred sword defending the country!"

The surging sacred flames blasted the blizzard apart and pierced the crack made by Kamito.

Surpassing the cursed ice's regeneration speed, the burning sacred flames howled inside «Zirnitra»'s body.

(...Not bad at all!)

While mentally offering praises to her, Kamito charged into the howling sacred flames without hesitation at all.

—This was a gamble. Suppose his predictions were wrong, Kamito would likely be burnt into ash. However—

(Luminaris's elemental waffe is purely of the holy attribute. In that case—)

It would be the same as for healing magic. Having inherited the «Darkness Elemental Lord»'s power, his «Demon King» body was going to deflect it.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Covering the jet-black «Demon's Sword» with lightning of darkness, Kamito charged into the flames.

He could feel overwhelming heat on his skin.

—However, the sacred flames did not touch Kamito.

Brushing away the flames in front of him—He saw it, right there.

(...That's it!)

The final wall of ice that even the howling sacred flames could not approach.

Inside the wall of ice was the core sustaining «Zirnitra» here.

Roaring, Kamito kicked the ground to accelerate further.

Then—

He released the final move from the Absolute Blade Arts.

"Absolute Blade Arts - Destructive Form, Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance - Eighteen Consecutive Strikes· Lightning Flare!"

Slashing freely left and right with lightning everywhere, he instantly smashed the wall of ice standing in his way.

Twelve, thirteen, fourteen—With every slash, a layer of the ice wall was shaved off, destroying it.

Even time for regeneration was not given. Ahead of the consecutive slashes with god-like speed was—

(...That's!?)

Kamito saw the figure imprisoned securely inside the wall of cursed ice.

He saw the figure of a human girl, dressed as a princess maiden.

(...Could that be the Queen of Ice Blossoms!?)

After seeing the girl's appearance up close, Kamito could not help but shudder.

He had seen the girl's face before.

Yes, it was what Rinslet had shown him at the «Water Elemental Shrine», inside a spirit crystal.

(...Judia Laurenfrost!?)

—Just at that moment...

The girl inside the cursed ice slowly opened her eyes.

She opened her emerald eyes that were identical to Rinslet's.

Za, zazaza, za—zazazaza, za, zaza, za—

Her adorable lips trembled slightly—

(...!)

In the next instant, Kamito's body was engulfed in black cursed ice.

Part 2

"...Why did this happen!? Then merging with «Zirnitra» is—"

After hearing Iseria's confession, Rinslet's face instantly went deathly pale.

What happened on that fateful day, four years ago.

The cruel truth shocked her deeply.

"No way, I can't believe it... Iseria-sama... Please tell me that isn't true...!"

'...Sorry, Rinslet. Everything is due to the sins of my past self.'

"Iseria-sama..."

Sitting astride Fenrir's back, Rinslet was at a total loss.

(...Why? ...Why not me but her...)

Fenrir jumped over fallen trees and landed on a piece of barren land ravaged by a blizzard.

—Just at that moment, still in a dazed state, Rinslet opened her eyes wide.

"—Kamito-san!?"

She saw Kamito charging into the punctured crack in Zirnitra.

The punctured crack quickly regenerated, intending to imprison Kamito inside.

(...Now is not the time to be shocked!)

Supposing what lay inside was really the existence that Iseria mentioned—

"—Fenrir, quickly!"

Receiving Rinslet's command, Fenrir took a massive leap.

While roaring to blow the blizzard apart, he jumped into the gradually closing crack.

Inside the crack were intensely burning flames.

Seeing that, Rinslet immediately chanted spirit magic while riding Fenrir.

"O king ruling over cold winter, I beseech thee to grant unto me thy protection—«Field of Cold»!"

At the last minute, a shield of cold air deployed in Fenrir's surroundings protected her.

Originally, these were not flames that could be defended against using spirit magic but fortunately, they had lost over half their power inside Zirnitra's body.

"—Kamito-san, where are you!?"

Cursed ice stood upright before her, blocking the way. In response—

"O primordial ice, shatter mine enemy—«Icicle Spear»!"

Rinslet summoned a giant spear of ice from the air, destroying the obstacle in one hit.

Inside the shattered wall of ice—

"—Kamito-san!"

She could see the figure of Kamito trapped inside the black cursed ice.

"...Guh, Rins... let...?"

His upper body already covered with cursed ice, Kamito moved his lips slightly.

Rinslet instantly jumped down from Fenrir's back and rushed over to his side.

"...Kamito-san, I shall save you right away!"

"...Rins... let... no... Hurry, escape..."

Kamito's voice sounded like he was out of breath, but Rinslet simply shook her head in response:

"I am a noble from the honorable House of Laurenfrost. I shall never abandon others!"

Rinslet took a step back and chanted spirit magic.

"O primordial ice, shatter mine enemy—«Icicle Spear»!"

The spear of ice summoned from the air pierced the black cursed ice that was afflicting Kamito.

Inside the magical chamber sealed in ice, a crisp sound was heard.

—But that was all.

Not even a single crack appeared on the cursed ice covering Kamito.

"...Why is this happening!?"

'The cursed ice is absorbing Kazehaya Kamito's burgeoning divine power. This level of spirit magic is unable to deal any damage to it—'

Iseria's voice sounded in her mind.

"Why is this happening..."

The black cursed ice even absorbed Rinslet's magic as well, advancing even faster.

"...Guh, ah, ahhhh...!"

Strangled with cursed ice tightening around his throat, Kamito made painful noises.

"Kamito-san... Kamito-san...!"

Rinslet reflexively hugged him, cradling her arms around his neck.

This was to protect Kamito's head from the spreading of the cursed ice.

But that kind of action proved fruitless as well.

The cursed ice mercilessly froze her arms gradually.

"...Guh, Rins... let... hurry... let go..."

"...No... Don't... wanna!"

Rinslet kept shaking her head like a child throwing a tantrum.

Throwing her usual elegance out the window, she screamed with a crying face:

"B-Because if you're gone, Claire will be heartbroken!"

"...!"

"Also the Captain, Her Highness the Imperial Princess, Miss Sword Spirit... As well as m-me..."

Rinslet stared in the Kamito's face while cradling his head in both arms.

They were close enough to feel each other's breaths. Rather ill-timed, their cheeks went red.

"Rinslet..."

"...That's why... I will never... ever give up!"

Hearing Rinslet's words—

"...Ahhh... Right, ah...!"

Despite his hazy consciousness, Kamito still nodded.

(...Th-There should be some solution...)

He felt an intense chill all over his body. Spreading to his feet, the cursed ice was absorbing divine power.

"...Guh... Ah...."

Kamito's eyelids slowly closed over his eyes.

"—Kamito-san!"

Rinslet screamed loudly but Kamito did not wake up.

...He had apparently lost consciousness completely.

(...Ooh, shattering this cursed ice is the only way!)

Rinslet refined divine power, preparing to unleash spirit magic again.

—At this time, something glowed inside the cursed ice that was gradually imprisoning the two of them.

(...Miss Sword Spirit?)

What was glowing was the sacred sword in Kamito's hand.

Indeed, even with his entire body covered in cursed ice, Kamito still did not let go of the «Demon Slayer». Even with his divine power sucked dry, in a state of unconsciousness, he still maintained its elemental waffe form without dispelling it.

That was Kamito's will, resisting to the very end.

He knew. That this «Demon Slayer» was his only hope for breaking the cursed ice—

(...So long as he has enough divine power, he can allow Miss Sword Spirit to bring out her power!)

And the only method was—

Making her decision, Rinslet nodded.

"Kamito-san... I, love you, Kamito-san—"

She touched Kamito's cheeks with both hands.

Then—

"E-Even as a noble, I have confessed my feelings. Before I hear your answer, I will not permit you to die...!"

She kissed the unconscious Kamito.

With every breath, she sent refined divine power into Kamito's body.

Kamito's throat moved as a result, despite the fact that he was supposed to have lost consciousness.

"...Guh... Ah, ku..."

"I offer you all of my divine power, Kamito-san—"

Hugging Kamito's neck tightly, Rinslet kissed even deeper.

The «Demon Slayer»'s light strengthened, its rays producing diffused reflection inside the cursed ice.

The cursed ice cracked. From that crevice, the sacred sword, shining with silver-white luster, appeared.

"...O-Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Just as Kamito's mighty yell echoed within «Zirnitra»'s body, in that very instant...

The prison of cursed ice locking them away was shattered.

Part 3

The cursed ice's remains scattered like glittering stars.

In the center was Kamito standing there, holding Rinslet in his arms.

"...Kamito... -san...!"

Rinslet's lips, as lovely as a flower bud, parted slightly.

Kamito placed her onto the back of Fenrir who was waiting on the side.

"—Thank you, Rinslet."

Rinslet had exhausted her power. Kamito gently placed his hand on her head.

Currently, massive divine power was flowing in a fierce torrent inside Kamito's body.

This was the divine power that Rinslet had used all her strength to deliver to him. Light from the «Demon Slayer» in his hand illuminated every nook and cranny inside «Zirnitra»'s body.

The light illuminated the figure in the deepest part of the cursed ice where darkness resided.

The «Queen of Ice Blossoms»—Judia Laurenfrost.

Za, zazaza, za, zazazazazazaza, zazaza, zaza—

Her lips kept producing strange noises, creating cursed ice in Kamito's surroundings.

But it was useless. So long as the «Demon Slayer» in Kamito's hand still had divine power, the cursed ice was unable to approach him.

"Judia..."

With a pained expression, Rinslet stared at her sister inside the cursed ice.

But Judia's empty gaze did not reflect her figure.

"...What is going on? What is actually up with her—"

While staring at the girl in the cursed ice, Kamito asked Rinslet behind him.

Rinslet bit her lip and hesitated for a moment before...

"—Like the corrosion of the «Elemental Lords», the «Otherworldly Darkness» is responsible."

Finally, she explained with an expression of suffering.

"...The «Otherworldly Darkness» is in her body?"

"Yes. Iseria-sama told me—The truth of that particular day."

Rinslet nodded and lowering her gaze slightly, she began to recount.

—Four years ago, on the day of the «Water Elemental Festival».

Corroded by the «Otherworldly Darkness», the «Water Elemental Lord» was on the verge of losing control. If further corruption continued at the same rate, it was easily conceivable that she would eventually end up along the same path as the «Fire Elemental Lord» who had destroyed the town of Dylus.

But her actual condition was actually more severe than that of the «Fire Elemental Lord»'s back then.

The «Otherworldly Darkness» corroding the «Water Elemental Lord» not only intended to invade «Astral Zero» but also the «Human Realm» which was supposed to be isolated on a material level.

"...Coming into contact with that darkness by chance was Judia."

Looking at the girl in the cursed ice, Rinslet bit her lip.

"If only I had conducted the ritual on that day as customary—"

Sensing that a princess maiden in the human realm intended to contact the «Water Elemental Lord», the «Otherworldly Darkness» caused part of the darkness to sneak into her body through the ritual.

Judia was an excellent princess maiden. This was perhaps one of the factors causing the tragedy. Infected by the insanity of the «Otherworldly Darkness», she intended to summon the main body of the darkness to the human realm—

"...I see."

Listening to this point, Kamito suddenly reacted.

"In order to stop that, Iseria—"

"...Yes."

Rinslet nodded and continued.

"On that day, the «Water Elemental Lord» was on the last vestiges of sanity. In order to prevent the worst outcome, she sealed her—Judia—in cursed ice, together with the «Otherworldly Darkness»."

—Those were the memories of the truth that Iseria had found from within the «Water Elemental Lord».

"But it has awakened once more—"

Most likely in the instant when Kamito and his team was liberating the elemental lord in «Astral Zero», the «Otherworldly Darkness» was activated.

The darkness sealed in the cursed ice resonated and recovered its power.

Then breaking the cursed ice, the darkness controlled Judia and started moving autonomously.

First it used mind control on the Elfim inhabiting the forest and started preparing the revival of the powerful spirit, «Zirnitra». Then merging with the powerful entity, it intended to summon the true body of the darkness into the human realm to replace itself.

"...Is there a way to save her?"

Looking at Judia who was still making noises, Kamito asked.

Rinslet readied her bow elemental waffe and stood next to Kamito.

"—Definitely possible. Assuming it's you, Kamito-san, the one who freed the «Fire Elemental Lord»."

Kamito silently nodded and readied the «Demon Slayer».

Concentrating the turbulent divine power into one point, he poured it into the blade.

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- «Freezing Arrow»!"

Rinslet used the last of her divine power to fire the final shot.

Anxious to save her sister, the arrow she had fired with full concentration pierced the wall of cursed ice, creating a tiny crack.

Kamito made a thrust with the sword's tip towards that crack—

"—Come back. Your sister is waiting."

Shining silver-white, the sacred sword pierced the chest of the «Queen of Ice Blossoms».

Epilogue

Part 1

Prior to dawn, the sky was still dark and the snow-covered land was shrouded in silence.

Having lost its core, the «Queen of Ice Blossoms», Zirnitra's bloated existence could not be sustained and collapsed. Originally, spirits destroyed in the human realm would disappear and return to Astral Zero, but having melded together with tangible matter, Zirnitra had lost this trait of spirits and ended up as a corpse left out in the open.

Taking the unconscious Judia, Kamito and Rinslet returned to Winter Gulf Castle for now.

Attacked by the ice dragons, the castle walls were severely damaged but the interior of the castle was essentially unharmed. There were no deaths among the soldiers either.

In order to prevent chaos from breaking out among the people in the castle, Rinslet kept Judia in her own room for now. Snoring away in her slumber, Judia looked very young in face, almost as though her time had stopped since the «Water Elemental Festival» on that day four years ago.

As for Judia's sudden return, Mireille could hardly contain her surprise initially but soon displayed her characteristic optimism, offering with Milla to take care of Judia together.

After finishing her duties for the most part, Rinslet was having a bath alone in the purification facility.

"...Phew. With too many things happened, I am totally exhausted."

Immersed in the hot water up to her shoulders, Rinslet breathed a sigh of relief.

Due to defending Winter Gulf Castle and giving Kamito the majority of her divine power, her body was excessively fatigued.

To avoid collapsing on the ground, she had to recover her divine power as quickly as possible.

...Things will only get busier from now on. Not just about Judia but also arranging for healers to treat the wounded soldiers, repairing the half-destroyed castle walls, as well as—

(...I still need to do something about those children who lost their forest.)

Rinslet had gathered the Elfim children whose settlement was destroyed, bringing them to the castle for protection and medical treatment.

Elfim tribes were not bound by imperial laws to begin with, but those living in the «Forest of Ice Blossoms» were equivalent to Laurenfrost subjects. Giving them necessary protection was part of a noble's duties.

(...Before Father and Mother return, I must fulfill the duties of a temporary ruler properly.)

While she was pondering these matters in the bath, her body felt scorching as though on fire.

"...Huah... I-It's here... again...!"

Her heart was beating intensely and she could feel divine power that should have been depleted, coursing rapidly through her body.

...The reason did not require much thinking. It was precisely the kiss she shared with Kamito.

(...This power, what on earth is going on?)

Touching her moist lips with her finger, Rinslet murmured to herself.

Part 2

—Kamito was alone on a terrace in the castle, looking up at the dawn sky.

The rays of sunrise coming from the Kyria Mountain Range gradually illuminated the entirety of the «Forest of Ice Blossoms» under his view.

Meanwhile he was gazing down at the giant corpse of «Zirnitra», lying in the depths of the forest.

(...Restia, where exactly did she go?)

Kamito exhaled white mist.

She escaped into the forest—That was what the Elfim princess maiden had mentioned.

Then she was probably still in the forest.

Once the sun was up, Kamito intended to search for her again.

(...Such a shame that the Holy Kingdom's knights got away.)

According to Natalia, captain of the «Wolf Ritters», Luminaris and the «Sacred Spirit Knights» had already disappeared without trace by the time she went to rescue members of the «Wolf Ritters». If possible, Kamito naturally wanted to capture Luminaris to interrogate for information. But including Luminaris, everyone should be covered in wounds, so the «Sacred Spirit Knights» were probably not going to continue hunting down Restia.

"Kamito-san—"

At this moment, he heard an apprehensive voice from behind.

Looking back, he found Rinslet at the entrance to the terrace, having just finished her bath.

She was still wearing the attire for ritual purification with a bathrobe worn on her shoulders.

Her skin was still showing a red flush with faint water vapor rising.

Confronted with the young lady's seductive appearance, Kamito could not help but feel his heart rate rising.

"Rinslet..."

She walked over to Kamito's side and leaned against the railing.

"Umm, about Judia, I am very grateful. It is all thanks to you, Kamito-san."

"No, I'm the one who should be thankful. If you weren't there at the time, Rinslet..."

"...What's the matter?"

"No, nothing..."

Catching faint glimpses of her cleavage from the gap in her bathrobe, Kamito averted his gaze.

The sun was gradually rising, causing her long, platinum blonde hair to look increasingly lustrous and beautiful.

"Umm, yes..."

Rinslet seemed to be shyly stammering as she tried to bring up a topic.

"Umm, I-I wanted to talk about what happened back then..."

"...Back then?"

"Y-Yes... L-Like I said, back then!"

Her face grew redder and she even pouted.

"Oh, sure..."

Only now did Kamito finally realize.

...She was talking about kissing Kamito to transfer divine power to him.

"...B-Back then, umm... Thank goodness."

Still pouting, Rinslet suddenly leaned against Kamito.

"Back then, what I said, uh... was serious, you know?"

Her clear eyes of emerald were staring at Kamito uneasily.

As for Kamito—

"...What you said?"

"...Eh? Yes..."

Seeing question marks popping over Kamito's head, Rinslet could hardly conceal her confusion.

"...Umm, say... Could it be, you didn't hear it?"

"S-Sorry... Back then, my mind was hazy..."

...Kamito apologized honestly. Indeed, Rinslet seemed to have said something before kissing him—

"...~W-W-W-W-What...!?"

Rinslet trembled and shook.

Whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh... Suddenly, a blizzard began to blow in the surroundings.

"S-Sorry... C-Could you say it again..."

"...~F-Forget about it!"

Angrily, Rinslet turned her head away.

"...I-I clearly committed my resolve, a serious kiss... that's why..."

"...!"

—Just as Kamito was shaken, at that moment...

"...K-Kiss, k-kiss... Come again?"

"Damn it... So you've engaged in such shameless behavior again!"

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble...!

This time, the surrounding temperature rose rapidly.

(...Hold on, this voice is!?)

"...C-Claire! And Captain!?"

Rinslet cried out in a panic.

"H-Hold on... Why are the two of you here!?"

"W-We heard you two went on a trip—"

"We came to chase you down!"

With angry auras, the two girls approached Kamito.

"...S-Speaking of which, what is this about a k-kiss, k-kiss?"

"Hmm, I cannot pretend I did not hear it!"

"N-No... Umm, uh, it's not like what you're thinking—"

"...K-Kamito-san, what do you mean by that!?"

For some reason, even Rinslet started to pout when she was supposed to know the truth.

—At this moment...

Kamito's gaze was suddenly drawn to the terrace's entrance.

—Someone was standing there.

A girl with gorgeous long hair the color of darkness and dusk-colored eyes.

"...Res... tia—?"

Afterword

...I, love you, Kamito-san—

Hello everyone, I am Shimizu. Thank you very much for buying this book. Sorry for the long wait. This time, I present to everyone Volume 13 of Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance, "Queen of Ice Blossoms"!

One week has passed since the Academy was attacked using the opportunities afforded by the «Great Festival of the Spirits». Having recovered his memory, Kamito received a certain piece of news. Reportedly, a girl resembling Restia had appeared in a forest on near the Empire's borders. In order to confirm the veracity of this news, Kamito set off for Rinslet's homeland of Laurenfrost!

As a result, this volume is where the perfect well-bred lady, Rinslet, gets to shine. On further thought, she is the poor girl who never received any main plot devoted to her despite appearing on the cover of Volume 4... Finally, she gets the chance to counterattack this time. Because Rinslet is one of my favorite characters, writing this volume was quite an easy and enjoyable process!

Next comes acknowledgements. I am very thankful to Sakura Hanpen-sensei who has drawn outstanding and adorable illustrations again. How rare it is to put an animal on a light novel's cover.

Editor in charge, Sukawa-sama, sorry for causing you trouble all the time. Thank you and thank you once again.

Hyoujyuu Issei-sensei, thank you for drawing the best comic edition as always. The intense battle scenes always makes me look forward to them. The third volume of the comic with Est on the cover is also selling with favorable ratings. If possible, please show your support and check it out, I highly recommend it!

Finally, the greatest thanks goes to every reader. I am really really super thankful!

Next, just to let you know about a joint offering from Hirasakayomi-sensei, Sagarasou-sensei, Suzuri-sensei and Shimizu, a GranCrest's TRPG replay titled "NEET Lord's Dragon Slaying Tales" is currently for sale under Fujimi Dragon Book. Because it is a very fun (*very outrageous) replay, all interested readers should check it out. A certain familiar spirit from this series will also make an appearance there!

Also, also, there is news about the anime adaptation that will start broadcasting in July—

Including filming, script and cast of voice actors, one could say this is a gathering of the best staff. The production is by TNK whose other works include High School DxD and this spring's Kenzen Robo Daimidaler. The director is also Yanagisawa Tetsuya the same as for those two anime series. Please look forward to the product from the strongest lineup!

—Okay, the official start to the «Spirit War Arc» will finally arrive next volume. Let's meet again with Volume 14, "Upheaval in the Imperial Capital"!

Shimizu Yuu, March 2014

Illustrator's Afterword

Nice to meet you, or hello again, this is Sakura Hanpen!

Rinslet-san! Rinslet-san! It's been a while!!

I'm so happy to be drawing her for the cover this time!

The truth is, other than Scarlet this is the first time I'm drawing an animal spirit!

Because of that I ended up wasting a lot of time and caused lots of problems for Shimizu-sensei and our editor Sukawa-san T_T

But I'm glad I managed to draw her so cutely!

Rinslet-san really did a lot in this volume and that made me really happy!

It makes me look forward to the next volume...

Many other things have happened but I'll keep doing my best for this so treat me favourably!

Well then, see you next volume!

あまがき

■初めまして、またはお久しぶりです桜はんぺんです！
リンスレットさん！リンスレットさん久々！！
また表紙で描けてとても嬉しいです…！

実はカラーでスカーレット以外の動物精霊を描くのは初です！
なので無駄に時間がかかってしまって志瑞先生と担当の洲川さんには
大変ご迷惑をおかけしました；；；

でも可愛く描けたからよかったなーと！

リンスレットさんがたくさん活躍してくれてすごくうれしい巻でした！
次巻も楽しみというか気になります…。

いろんなことが始まっていますがこれからも頑張りますので
よろしくお願いします！

それではまた次巻で～！

お世話になりました！！
志瑞先生、yumiさん
ミニキャラ：うめだ夏乃ちゃん
トリルさん
ありがとうございます！

2014.11.14
桜はんぺん

桜はんぺん
は休みの
なな



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